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A magazine of literature and the arts

VOLUME XLIX NUMBER 2 SUMMER 1996

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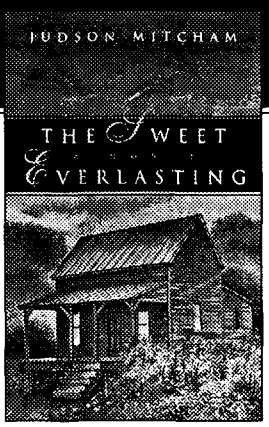

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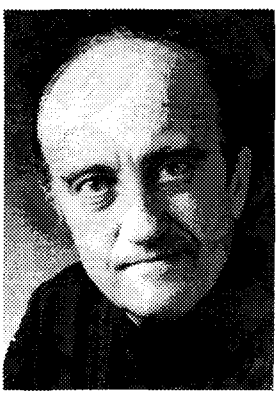

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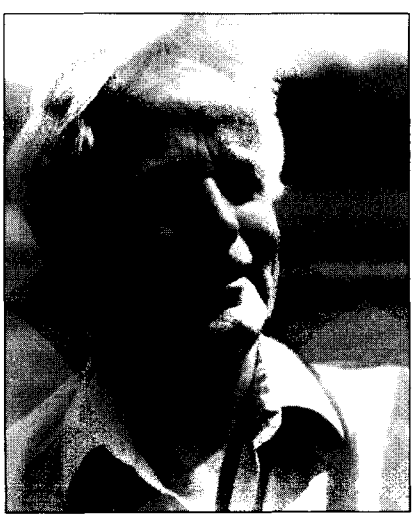

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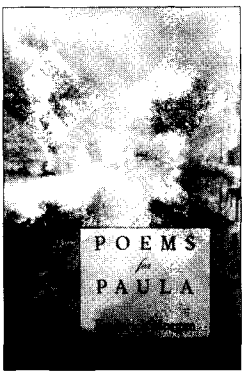

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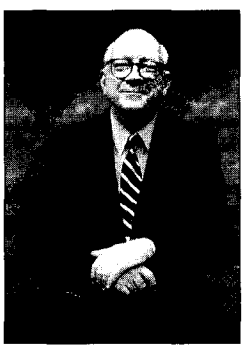
by FREDERICK MORGAN



FREDERICK MORGAN, a founding editor of *The Hudson Review*, continues today as a co-editor. He is the author of nine books of poetry, including *Poems: New and Selected*, and two volumes of prose.

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How shall I say it, dear Paula?
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while love, year by year, builds in silence.

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by multiple schemes and arrangements,
sometimes harassed beyond measure,
not certain they'll find satisfaction—

yet all the while trusting that somehow
they'll glean from the zest and disorder
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JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Mistah Lowell—He Dead

> In some ways you are the luckiest poet I know! –
> in some ways not so lucky, either, of course.
> —Elizabeth Bishop

Sometimes it seems that the only real thing about Robert Lowell was his madness. This was all too real, and, for those who had to live with it, in the end it proved quite impossible. Poor Robert Lowell, born to nearly every advantage but lacking the crucial element of full-time sanity. Madness and art is an old story, of course, and in Lowell's generation it was pitilessly retold. Call the roll: Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, Theodore Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath (a bit younger than these others). Now add up the staggering cost of mania, depression, paranoia, alcoholism, heart attack of a kind almost inseparable from broken heart, and suicide. "We poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness." Wordsworth wrote it, but these poets lived it. A grimmer and sadder story no one could have devised.

"He never realized, don't you know—he never suspected that to be stark raving mad is somewhat of a handicap to a writer," said Max Beerbohm, with his usual delicate comic irony, of D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence was literarily, not certifiably, mad, driven to wild extremes by wretched ideas. Robert Lowell, who had no ideas whatsoever but who was genuinely mad, knew what a distinct disadvantage it was. Over and over, in letters to friends, he conveyed the awfulness of his attacks—for such was the word he used to describe his horrendous, almost regular breakdowns, "attacks," as if they came from outside. Taken off in police wagons, straightjacketed, placed in padded cells, electroshocked, heavily Thorazined, confronted by a series of uncomprehending psychotherapists—Lowell had had the whole course, the full

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catastrophe, underwent every sadness, humiliation, nightmare. He once wrote to John Berryman that they had in common "visiting the bottom of the world." In his poem "In a Dark Time," Theodore Roethke wrote: "What's madness but nobility of soul / At odds with circumstance." Not to put too fine a point on it: Horseshit! What madness is is hell and the worst luck in the world.

Elizabeth Hardwick, Lowell's second wife, who lived with him longer than anyone, wrote to Allen Tate in 1959 after another of her husband's breakdowns—his fifth in ten years, with many more to come—that they brought "real suffering." She added: "And for what? I do not know the answer to the moral problems posed by a deranged person, but the dreadful fact is that in purely personal terms this deranged person does a lot of harm."

The rhythms of Robert Lowell's breakdowns are by now perhaps more famous than those of his poems. Things would begin to "speed up" for him; he would burble on, not infrequently about Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Hitler (a sentimental favorite); streams of wild manic energy coursed through him; he would find a new young woman—a student, a nurse, an Italian, a Lithuanian—who held out the promise of a new life, a fresh start, and to whom he would inevitably propose marriage, his wife and daughter at home mere details to be taken care of later; and finally, spun quite out of control now, violent and dangerous, the 911 call goes out, the police come in, and the ambulance is on its way to Bellevue, Payne-Whitney, MacLean's, or some other insane asylum; whence commences the nightmare of the coming down, through electricity and chemicals and the talking cure; then, the fragile self is brought home, packed in cotton, dominated by depression, filled with remorse. "*Du calme, du calme*," the physician in "Heart of Darkness" advises Marlow before he is about to plunge into the tropics; and so did Lowell have to remain during his long months of recuperation. He had to stay calm while awaiting his next plunge into madness, which showed up a vast deal more promptly than Godot, and after which, as Lowell wrote to Randall Jarrell, when the latter was recovering from a breakdown of his own, there was the "groveling, low as dirt purgatorial feelings with which one emerges."

I have just read through Ian Hamilton's *Robert Lowell, a Biography* and *Lost Puritan, A Life of Robert Lowell* by Paul Mariani,

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both of them sympathetic to their subject, Mariani perhaps a bit more than Hamilton, but both featuring Lowell's madness. Mariani's was written partly to de-emphasize the strong role played by madness in Hamilton's book, but does not quite succeed in doing so. It could scarcely have been otherwise. Madness was the theme, the plot, the story, the background music of Robert Lowell's life. What is amazing about that life is that he achieved as much as he did in the intervals between his breakdowns. Along with a substantial body of poems, Lowell left a modest collection of critical prose, a book of translations, two moderately successful theatrical adaptations (of Melville's "Benito Cereno" and Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molyneux"), translations for the stage of *Phèdre* and *Prometheus Bound*, and a lengthy teaching career. He juggled all this and his madness, too, until one afternoon in the early autumn of 1977, in Manhattan, when he was returning from abroad to his daughter and Miss Hardwick, sitting in the back of a cab, clutching a wrapped-up Lucien Freud portrait of his still current wife, Caroline Guinness Blackwood, his heart finally gave out.

Dead at the age of sixty, Robert Lowell had a dreadful life and an astonishing career. After serving a fairly brief apprenticeship, he was immediately elevated to the very grand heights. *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), published when he was not yet thirty years old, was greeted with the literary equivalent of trumpets and a twenty-one-gun salute. Selden Rodman's review in the *New York Times Book Review* gives something of the tone of its reception: "One would have to go back as far as 1914, the year that saw the publication of Robert Frost's *North of Boston* or to T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* to find a poet whose first public speech has had the invention and authority of Robert Lowell's." Randall Jarrell chirped in with: "A few of these poems, I believe, will be read as long as men remember English." Louise Bogan wrote about Lowell's "moral earnestness . . . it is extraordinary to find it at present in so pure a form."

Give that man a Pulitzer, and in 1947, when Lowell was thirty, they did. That same year they also gave him a Guggenheim, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a few pages of photographs in *Life*, at a time when *Life* was more widely read than any other magazine in America. That summer Lowell was also offered the job of Consultant in Poetry at the Library of

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Congress, which he took up after spending two months at Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga, New York. In his biography, Ian Hamilton quotes a headline in the *Sunday Globe* in Boston that read, "Most Promising Poet in 100 Years . . . May Be Greater Than James and Amy." The prizes would never stop, the plaudits never cease. In future years, Robert Lowell might have been thought to have slipped with the publication of this book, made a mistake with the publication of that book, but all criticism of him would be in the context of his being America's greatest contemporary poet, the successor to Eliot, Frost, Pound, and Stevens.

One reads *Lord Weary's Castle* today and wonders how this quite came about. Its poems are all formal, in meter and structure, most employ rhyme but frequently not of an end-stopping kind. Few are the memorable phrasings in the poems. They don't, in any persuasive way, seem to issue out of "lived experience," which Lowell would later claim was the quality that marked all his poems. They are dour and dark enough, God knows, though what precisely has brought all this dolorosity about is not always clear from the words on the page. Classical allusions and references to Jesus are admixed with some regularity—stir and season, as the cookbooks say, to taste. These poems, in other words, feel willed, as if written to order, and the customers all resided in a little town called New Criticism.

Lowell himself perhaps best expressed his own doubts about this book. In an interview of 1964 with Stanley Kunitz, he allowed that he couldn't quite explain "why that much attention has been paid me." He brought up *Lord Weary's Castle*, a book, he thought "out of the mainstream, a rather repellent, odd, symbolic Catholic piece of work. It may be that some people have turned to my poems because of the very things that are wrong with me. I mean the difficulty I have with ordinary living, the impracticality, the myopia. Seeing less than others can be a great strain."

In a strong sense, Robert Lowell was New Criticism's child. Soon after he discovered his vocation as a poet, in 1937, he left Harvard and set off for Tennessee to study with Allen Tate; and in what has since become part of the Lowell legend, he set up a Sears Roebuck tent in the yard at Tate and his wife Caroline Gordon's house, "Benfolly," in Clarksville. In Tennessee, he studied briefly under John Crowe Ransom, who, then in his last

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days at Vanderbilt, was about to take up residence at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. In his biography, Ian Hamilton writes: "If Ransom was the Southern writers' spiritual chief, Tate was their unflagging impetuous polemicist." Agrarians, Fugitives, Southerners, these men may have been, but they were also international in their poetic connections: Ransom was admired by T. S. Eliot and Tate had lived in Paris and London and Greenwich Village. The summer that Lowell lived in his tent on the Tates' lawn, Ford Madox Ford was a house guest of the Tates.

Lowell followed Ransom to Kenyon, where he fell in with Randall Jarrell (who was three years older than he) and Peter Taylor, later to become the novelist and short story writer. He appears to have studied hard at Kenyon, did a degree in classics, worked at developing a poetic style. Ransom published one of Lowell's youthful poems in *The Kenyon Review*. Intellectual marines arriving in little magazines, the New Critics all had their journals: Ransom had *Kenyon*, Tate was editor of *The Sewanee Review*, down at the Louisiana office, at Baton Rouge, *The Southern Review* was co-edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. But for Lowell, Ransom's influence was decisive. "The kind of poet I am was largely determined by the fact that I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism," he wrote in 1974, in connection with John Crowe Ransom's death. "From the beginning I was preoccupied with technique, fascinated by the past and tempted by other languages." In his early poems, written as if for New Critical analysis, Lowell supplied enough ambiguity to plaster Mona Lisa's smile permanently on the *punim* of William Empson.

These Southerners must have been not so secretly pleased to have a Boston Lowell in their camp. Robert, to be sure, was a complicated kind of Lowell. He was not one of the fabulously rich and landed Lowells, but of a lesser branch of the family. On the matter of levels of Lowellalia, Paul Mariani reports that Lowell's father was "definitely *not* one of your robust Captains-of-Industry Lowells, having descended through the much thinner line of Unitarian and Episcopalian ministers and poetasters." His mother's family, the Winslows, were rather grander than his father's; and as both Lowell's biographers make plain the key masculine figure in the young Robert Lowell's life was not his father, a genial but apparently ineffectual man, but his maternal grandfather, Arthur Winslow. Socially and financially, Arthur Winslow was

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much better fixed than Lowell's naval officer father, about whom, before his marriage, a friend of his mother's said that, if he were hers to deal with, she would have him lobotomized and his head stuffed with green peppers.

Even without Lowell's terrible mental illness, his bipolar condition, the major jigeroo in his brain that sent him flying off the track and rendered him permanently fragile, his mother would have given him enough problems to keep a full phalanx of shrinks off the dole. As if poor Lowell didn't have trouble enough, he was given a mother worthy of a Tennessee Williams play, Boston upper-class division. A spoiled girl who grew into an imperious and interfering woman, she seems to have left her son, and only child, with the feeling that he could only disappoint her: choosing the wrong wives, the wrong work, the wrong life. She was a mother of the kind that gives one very little peace when alive and then after her death leaves one feeling guilty.

Still, a Lowell remains a Lowell, and Robert, whether he wished it or not, handled his lineage the way one is instructed to handle one's American Express card: he never, that is, left home without it. Jean Stafford, Lowell's first wife, reported to Peter and Eleanor Taylor, as early as 1943, that "the greatest snobs in the world are bright New York literary Jews and the name Lowell works like a love-philtre" among them. My guess is that it also worked with George Santayana, who knew his Boston social hierarchies, with T. S. Eliot, and possibly with Ezra Pound, who even in his madness probably retained knowledge of what it meant to be a Lowell. None of these men, there is reason to suspect, would have responded quite so generously to the young Robert Lowell if his name had been, say, Jim Swenson.

Was Robert Lowell aware of the cachet that lay in his own name? I don't for a moment wish to report that he worked it for what it was worth—when he and Elizabeth Hardwick left Boston to take up residence in New York, he might even be said to have walked away from all that—but that he retained awareness of the extraordinary attention his name commanded there can be no doubt. In a letter of 1962 he reported a dream to Elizabeth Bishop in which Philip Rahv, then the editor of *Partisan Review*, who had "just married a society lady and bought a house on Beacon Street . . . was picking up everything I had carefully thrown away all my life—golden keys of social ease, till at the end

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his two sons [Rahv in fact had no children] had just entered Groton," while in the same dream Lowell's daughter had to settle for public school.

Elizabeth Bishop touched on the point when, in a letter to Lowell in 1959, she wrote, apropos of Byron: "As Pascal says, if you can manage to be well-born it saves you thirty years." A few years earlier, she made the same point with much greater specificity, when she wrote that she and probably most of their contemporaries are "green with envy of your kind of assurance." What she meant was the social assurance that Lowell put into the poems that became *Life Studies*. "I feel," Bishop wrote, "that I could write in as much detail about my Uncle Artie, say—but what would be the significance? Nothing at all . . . Whereas all you have to do is put down the names! And the fact that it seems significant, illustrative, American, etc., gives you, I think, the confidence you display about tackling any idea or theme, *seriously*, in both writing and conversation." To put Bishop's point somewhat differently: Would Lowell's poem "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" give off quite the same ping if the poem were titled "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Manny Klein"? Think, maybe, not.

The Lowell name had its own magic even in politics. Lowell's most famous political gesture, it will be recalled, was his affronting Lyndon Johnson in 1965 by refusing to show up for a White House gathering of artists. He claimed that his doing so would implicitly ally him with Johnson's escalation of the war then being fought in Vietnam. Lowell had first accepted this invitation, then backed out; he had at first agreed not to publicize his refusal to attend, then sent his letter to President Johnson to the *New York Times*, which ran it and the story on its front page. After stating that he was "enthusiastic about most of your domestic legislation and intentions," he added that he could "only follow our present foreign policy with the greatest dismay and distrust." He continued:

> I know it is hard for the responsible man to act; it is also painful for the irresolute man to dare criticism. At this anguished, delicate, perhaps determining moment, I feel I am serving you and our country best by not taking part in the White House Festival of the Arts.
>
> Respectfully, Robert Lowell

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The following day the herd of independent minds, considered alphabetically from Hannah Arendt to Robert Penn Warren, sent a telegram to President Johnson endorsing, as the *New York Times*'s headline had it, "Poet's Rebuff of President."

The larger question behind this affair is whether any other figure in the arts but Robert Lowell could have brought it off. One is inclined to doubt it. Straightforward snobbery aligned to reverse patriotism works powerful magic. Lowell continued to oppose United States involvement in Vietnam, and one sees something of the appeal of his almost purely Lowellian presence in the socially envious portrait that Norman Mailer drew of him in his book *Armies of the Night.* In this book, about the anti-Vietnam War protest march on the Pentagon—a Pulitzer Prize-winning book in its day that now reads like a comic book—Mailer reports restraining himself from saying to Lowell: "You, Lowell, beloved poet of many, what do you know of the dirt and dark deliveries of the necessary? What do you know of dignity hard-achieved, and dignity lost through innocence, and dignity lost by sacrifice for a cause one cannot name? What do you know about getting fat against your will, and turning into a clown of an arriviste baron when you would rather be an eagle or a count, or rarest of all, some natural aristocrat from these damned democratic states?"

On two other occasions Lowell's life took a political turn. In the first, in 1943, at the age of twenty-six, not long married to Jean Stafford, he became a conscientious objector in World War II. What is odd about this is that, almost up until the moment he declared himself CO, he was expecting to be drafted; and earlier he had even attempted to enlist so as to be able to go to officers' school. But when he wrote to President Roosevelt, he did so in good part as a Lowell: "You will understand how painful such a decision is for an American whose family traditions, like your own, have always found their fulfillment in maintaining, through responsible participation in both the civil and military services, our country's freedom and honor." Then he signed off: "I have the honor, Sir, to inscribe myself, with sincerest loyalty and respect, your fellow-citizen, Robert Traill Spence Lowell, Jr."

Lowell was, at that time, in his extreme Catholic phase—Allen Tate predicted he would become a monk—and his religion allowed him to twist the meaning of the War as "a betrayal of my country." (In his poem, "Memories of West Street and Lepke,"

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he wrote of this time: "I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O., / and made my manic statement / telling off the state and president. . . .") This, too, got play in the press: front page in the *New York Times*; "Lowell Scion Refuses to Fight" and "Socialite's Mother To Uphold Son" ran the headlines in the New England press. Other conscientious objectors sentenced at the same time got three years; Lowell got a year and a day, and was paroled after four months, a lighter sentence, according to a CO sentenced along with him, because he was, after all, a Lowell.

The other notable political incident in Lowell's life took place at Yaddo, while he was staying there as a guest artist in 1949. He accused the director, Miss Elizabeth Ames, of having close ties with the Communists and actually called in the FBI. This was done in one of his manic flights, his "speeding up," as he and his biographers refer to it; this time the speeding up caused him to discover Communists under the bed and ask that Miss Ames be fired from her job. He was still in a high Catholic phase, and there is nothing like religion added to psychosis to make one see evil everywhere. He had begun taking up with Elizabeth Hardwick, also a guest at Yaddo and his supporter in his demand for the firing of Miss Ames. Hamilton gives this sad incident more attention in his biography than does Mariani. The point of it I take to be that Lowell's politics could be wildly erratic, going from conscientious objector to Communist witch-hunter to oral exemplar, *whoosh*, without missing a stitch or even ever being called on it.

In reading about the all-but-unrelieved sadness of Robert Lowell's life, the single best piece of understatement comes from Gertrude Buckman, the divorced wife of Lowell's friend Delmore Schwartz, with whom Lowell had an affair that, as Miss Buckman would later aver, wasn't really all that much fun. Remarking that Lowell was "to the end of his life emotionally undeveloped and irresponsible," she added—and here is the understatement—that "he wasn't husband material."

She was absolutely correct, of course, even though a great many women at first didn't agree. His family name, his rugged handsomeness—a friend of Jean Stafford's described Lowell as "Heathcliff [as] played by Boris Karloff"—his prestige as a distinguished poet combined to provide an aphrodisiac of sorts, at least for a certain kind of woman. Lowell married thrice, and

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brought much grief to all three wives. Jean Stafford lost her good looks when Lowell, drunk, crashed a car they were driving in, Stafford's face smashing against the windshield, leaving her permanently with the flattened nose of a boxer too long in the ring. Lowell would later break her nose again, this time in a domestic battle. In a story she published not long after his death, "An Influx of Poets," Miss Stafford took a certain measure of revenge. The narrator's husband, a very thinly disguised Robert Lowell, is put down as obtuse, a snob ("he was as vain as a peacock that Copley had painted his distant Cousin Augustus's family"), and "by instinct anti-Semitic," a man who would "never have a Jew as a close friend."

Elizabeth Hardwick, who was married to Lowell from 1949 to 1972, is one of those candidates—Countess Tolstoy and Leonard Woolf are two others—for the Nobel Prize for Marriage, which ought to be given for taking impressive quantities of intense aggravation from an artist husband or wife. She saw Lowell through the most breakdowns, which almost invariably began with his having a new tootsie in tow, sped up and ready to start a new life. Other times he made plain that he thought the true woman for him was Elizabeth Bishop, to whom he was ever ready to propose marriage and whose lesbianism he apparently didn't feel posed a serious obstacle. In the late 1960s, an honorary denizen of Camelot, he put his moves on Jacqueline Kennedy. He had a daughter with Elizabeth Hardwick, and there must have been good times between them, but in the biographies her role in his life reads more and more like that of a twenty-four-hour home health-care worker who, out of richly deserved exasperation, turns into the querulous Blanche Bickerson quite at the end of her tether. Great biographical injustice is visited upon this woman.

Lady Caroline Blackwood, the writer who was Lowell's third wife—she was herself married twice before, first to Lucien Freud, then to a musician named Israel Citkowitz—seemed splendidly unsuitable straightaway; long, or even short, suffering was not much to her taste. They had a son together, and, after much shared argument and squalor, they parted. Lowell was in fact leaving her to return to Miss Hardwick when he died in the cab in Manhattan.

Yet for all the turmoil and torment in his life, Lowell had great

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powers of concentration. He was able to closet himself away—in his office-apartment in New York, in his barn-studio in Maine—for ten- and twelve-hour stretches, working on his literary projects. Apart from teaching, which he did off and on in a part-time way, Lowell, after his parents' death, did not have to work at a regular job. So he holed up and read, and, when the spirit was upon him, wrote. Along the way, he acquired much genuine literary culture; sometimes, one suspects, too much, so that every event in his life seemed decipherable to him only if an analog for it could be found in literature.

He also, in his quiet but efficient way, hustled his own career along. All the poets of his generation did. "I am so tired of poetry as Big Business I don't know what to do," Elizabeth Bishop wrote to Randall Jarrell in 1950. "What on earth is the happy medium—readers, certainly, but all this recording & reading & anthologizing is getting me." Yet, for all that, the generation of Lowell-Jarrell-Bishop-Schwartz-Berryman-Roethke was not least remarkable in its collective ambition. In their careers—if not in their sad lives—everything was calculated: readings, reviews, blurbs, no detail connected with career advancement was too small to overlook. Happy networkers, as we should now call them, they formed a nearly perfect daisy chain of mutual promotion. (I add "nearly" because, being poets after all, they allowed room to deflate one another's poetry behind one another's backs.) But they were otherwise quite shameless about reviewing and blurbing one another's books, writing one another recommendations, appointing one another to juries and to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, arranging prizes for one another. None of this is to deny that their obsession with poetry was real—it was—but they saw no reason to let this obsession stand in the way of career.

Theirs was a generation that came after the most powerful generation of poets America had ever known—the generation of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Frost, Moore, Crane, Williams. None of these older poets, please note, ever had a full-time university connection, whereas all the poets in Lowell's generation, including Lowell, who was given tenure at Harvard, did. Poets of the Lowell generation were the first to be thoroughly professionalized, to write poetry, to write about poetry, to teach poetry, to do nothing, really, outside the realm of poetry. The earlier generation had other work: banking, insurance, medicine, editorial

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work. They may have thought this work secondary, but in a useful way it kept them in the world. The consequences of this were not negligible. It gave them a wider view of things, and a deeper understanding that life was about more than poetic composition. "Well, certainly," Tolstoy wrote to Ivan Bunin, "go on writing if you feel like it, but remember that it can never be the aim of life."

Poets of the Lowell generation must have sensed that they were writing in a sad aftermath, akin perhaps to writing drama in fourth century Athens in the wake of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. Lowell was in this connection perhaps the best at keeping up the appearance—though perhaps pretense is the more precise word here—that things were otherwise. Reviewing *Life Studies* in *Partisan Review* in 1959, F. W. Dupee noted of Lowell that "he wrote as if poetry were still a major art and not merely a venerable pastime which ought to be perpetuated." Dupee, be it noted, wrote in a tone of regret, for he felt that, in *Life Studies*, Lowell's career had taken a turn in the wrong direction. The poems in *Life Studies*, he concluded, "represent, perhaps, major poetry pulling in its horns and putting on big spectacles and studying how to survive." Joseph Bennett, in *The Hudson Review*, was much more dismissive, declaring that this book, "lazy and anecdotal, . . . is more suited as an appendix to some snobbish society magazine, to *Town and Country* or *Harper's Bazaar*, rather than as a purposeful work."

From the standpoint of reputation, both Dupee and Bennett were wrong. *Life Studies* sent Lowell's reputation soaring. His first book in eight years, coming after the disappointingly slender volume, *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, it contained, in his words, his "first unmeasured [that is unmetered] verse," the first poetry he had written that dispensed with the "hurdle of rhyme and scansion between yourself and what you want to say most forcibly." Mariani titles the chapter in which he wrote these poems "Breakthrough." *Life Studies*, published in 1959, was Lowell's beginning effort at letting loose, letting go, letting 'er rip. As the country was heading into the 1960s, his timing could scarcely have been more perfect.

Some books—*Remembrance of Things Past, The Golden Bowl, Nostromo*—should never be read for the first time. But *Life Studies* may be one of those books one should never read for the second time. Certainly, it seems thinner, dimmer, than the first time

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round. It contains "91 Revere Street," the longish prose piece that was to be the opening for the autobiography Lowell never got round to writing. Mariani refers to the "polished Flaubertian surface of *Life Studies*," and, true enough, much of the writing in it, prose and poetry, has a handsomely burnished feel. Memorable phrasings are not wanting: Lowell's formulation in the poem "Ford Madox Ford" of Ford's *The Good Soldier* as "the best French novel in the [English] language" is one that has stuck with me for more than thirty years; so, too, has the lovely line "There is no Jesus and Mary is his mother," awarded to the subject of "For George Santayana."

Still, many of the poems disappoint. "Inauguration Day: January 1953," which sees the death of America in the election of Dwight David Eisenhower—"and the Republic summons Ike / the mausoleum in her heart"—today seems faintly ridiculous, a literary man's political feverishness. For a professed Latinist, it is a trifle dismaying to find Lowell misusing the word "decimated." Some of these poems deal in cliché abstraction: "Memories of West Street and Lepke" notes that "These are the tranquilized *Fifties* / and I am forty . . ."; and "During Fever" closes with mention of "Freudian papa." Many of the poems—"Father's Bedroom," "For Sale," "Words for Hart Crane" among them—disappoint; reading them, one waits for that last tile to click into place, satisfyingly closing the poem. But it never comes: they have, as Dupee noted in his review, no denouement.

Life Studies is considered a breakthrough book for Robert Lowell because it set him free, in many of its poems, from the tensions of strict meter and extended the range of his verse to include the directly personal. The confessional poet was emerging but not yet altogether out of the box; in this book, at any rate, what he is chiefly confessing to is being a Lowell and, perhaps better, a Winslow. The book also reveals him as a man with a moistened finger carefully extended in the air, checking the literary climate. "He watched its weather," Stanley Kunitz wrote of Lowell, "with the diligent attention of a meteorologist, studying its prevailing winds, regularly charting its high and low pressure areas." As the years went on, Lowell attempted to dramatize the nation's woes as if they were his own.

By the time *For the Union Dead* (1964) appeared, Lowell's reputation not merely as a major poet, but as *the* American poet

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was well on its way toward being solidified. In the words of Richard Poirier, "Robert Lowell is, by something like a critical consensus, the greatest American poet of the mid-century, probably the greatest poet writing in English." Let pass that T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden still walked the earth, Lowell was, at the very minimum, thought the coming man, the great white hope, "our truest historian," to adopt the title of Poirier's review.

So solid had Lowell's reputation become that he had arrived in the enviable position of achieving critical approval even for writing badly. In Paul Mariani's documentation of the reception accorded *Notebooks, 1967–68*, we are reminded that William Meredith, in a front-page review in *The New York Times Book Review*, found the book, even though imperfect, a proper response to "the modern god of chaos" under which Lowell was forced to work; and Robert Boyers thought the same book a "comprehensive and essential document" of the conscientiousness of our century. The subtext of these comments, of course, is that Lowell's harried and horrendous times forced him to write badly.

But then nothing Lowell did, no matter how shoddy, failed to garner praise and prizes. *Imitations*, his book of translations, some of them from languages he himself couldn't read, though it was attacked by many reviewers—"schoolboys," wrote Dudley Fitts, "should read it in a salt mine"—was nonetheless praised by Edmund Wilson and A. Alvarez and won the 1962 Bollingen Prize for translation. Toward the end of his life, returning to translations of the poetry of Eugenio Montale, Lowell allowed, to his friend Frank Bidart, that in his translations "I did shockingly turn, twist, some of the translations to my own morbid purposes." No mention is made of returning the money to the Bollingen Foundation.

For a poet who now appears greatly productive, for the better part of his career Robert Lowell was, poetically, rather costive. Poems did not come easily to him, and then he tended to revise and revise and sometimes misrevise them. But in the early 1960s, he loosened still further his own standard, becoming more impressed with poetry of the kind produced under the less strict prosodic notions of William Carlos Williams. The *Dream Songs* of his friend John Berryman, sonnets written in blank verse, eliminated the costiveness problem for good. Logorrhea now set in. Soon he was producing four such sonnets a week, so that during

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the year 1968 he produced roughly 4,000 (what he considered) publishable lines in this largely improvisational form—"something," as Mariani reports, "by turns loose and strict, rhyming or not, a form forever hungry to devour whatever events washed up along the sands."

A vast amount happened just then to be washing up. These were the years that Lowell had become active in protesting the war in Vietnam; he had become closer to the Kennedy gang in Washington; he had found a soul brother in Senator Eugene McCarthy, who took on Lyndon Johnson in the 1968 election before Johnson dropped out; his marriage was breaking up; he continued to suffer his breakdowns, with their usual hopeless love affairs. One such affair, with an Irish woman named Mary Keelan, employed at the Mexican monastery of the radical priest Father Ivan Illich, netted him, as we learn from Mariani, "a sequence of twelve sonnets." What it netted Miss Keelan we shall let pass.

Reading the poems produced by Lowell's new aesthetic of immediacy, one finds oneself freshly impressed by the paean of W. H. Auden to careful prosody: "Blessed be all the metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, force us to have second thoughts, free us from the fetters of the Self." What Lowell was doing, of course, was fettering, binding, lashing himself to Self. The year before he died he told an interviewer that "the thread that strings it [his work] together is my autobiography, it is a small-scale *Prelude*, written in many different styles and with digressions, yet a continuing story." So continuing was it that, reading the poems in *Notebooks* today, one wonders why, but for the rule that a sonnet may not exceed fourteen lines, any of these poems end quite when they do; otherwise, there appears to be no reason for them to cease. In a remark quoted in Hamilton's biography but not in Mariani's, Jonathan Raban, the English travel writer and a late-life friend of Lowell's, recounts how Lowell's revisions were often made in disregard of actual content. His "favorite method of revision," Raban reports, "was simply to introduce a negative into a line, which absolutely reversed its meaning but very often would improve it." This ought to stop all close readers of Robert Lowell dead in their academic tracks.

Driven by his new style, Lowell's poems became more openly political, as he himself had with the advent of the radical politics of the late 1960s. He wrote sonnets about Kennedy and Nixon—

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whatever your feelings about the man, there is something about the name Nixon that just doesn't come off in a poem—he slipped in his own nightmares about nuclear war. Whether or not such politics are permissible in a poem is not the issue; what is is whether Lowell brought it off. Some people think he did. Richard Tillinghast, a former student of Lowell's who in 1969 invited him to come out to Berkeley to view the student revolution as a visiting professor (and what better, safer seat from which to view a revolution than that of a visiting professor) thinks that Lowell's "power as a political poet lay in his knack of becoming one with the *Zeitgeist*, and—despite the many things that made him absolutely unlike anyone else—somehow managed to dramatize himself in his poems as a representative citizen."

I don't think Lowell did bring it off, nor that there was anything in the least representative about him. These "public" poems fail the politics test—that is, if you don't agree with the poet's politics, the poems seem empty, pompous, self-dramatizing merely. "In the past five years," Mariani writes, "he had honed a poetics of the quotidian, an equivalent to Mailer's New Journalism, in which whatever chance tossed up he had snatched for his subject." It is far from clear whether Mariani is aware that this is, at best, a deeply equivocal compliment.

But the personal side revealed in the new Lowell poems wrought much greater publicity than the political side, and this of a notorious kind. Long the leading poet of the "anguish school," as Elizabeth Bishop once called him, Lowell now brought his own romances and marriages out into the open in his poems. Jean Stafford would later say that *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* was really about her marriage to Lowell, but there it was at least disguised. In *The Dolphin* (1973), he not only wrote about his domestic life, but quoted directly from letters Elizabeth Hardwick had sent him when he had left her for Caroline Blackwood. All the ethical niceties of this seem to have been lost on Lowell. W. H. Auden threatened not to speak to him because of this book. Elizabeth Bishop pled with him not to publish it; such cheapened use of personal material, she claimed, was for the likes of Mailer, or James Dickey, or Mary McCarthy—"they don't count, in the long run," she implored, but he did.

In the end, Lowell went ahead and published the book, with its unappealing mixture of fact and fiction, its use of his former

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wife's letters, its large supply of grist for the mills of scandal-mongers and future biographers. Some critics took his head off for it, but none with more verbal violence than Adrienne Rich, an old friend, who wrote, "I think this is bullshit eloquence, a poor excuse for a cruel and shallow book." In the end, the best criticism of *The Dolphin* is probably that of Miss Hardwick, who called it an "inane, empty, unnecessary" book, filled, even after three years of composition and revision, with "so many fatuities, indiscretions, bad lines still there on the page." Even as scandal, the book fails. What it shows is a man unhinged by his own megalomaniacal self-importance. It remains only to add that *The Dolphin* won the Pulitzer Prize, Lowell's third.

Robert Lowell's life came unraveled at its close. After five years without a breakdown, he began to fool with his lithium dosages and the drug began to let him down, as did Caroline Blackwood, who hadn't any interest in being the nurse-mother-wife to him that Elizabeth Hardwick had been. Yet my guess is that he died thinking himself a genius. Why shouldn't he have? People had been treating him with the deference due a genius for thirty years. After the critical success of *For the Union Dead*, he wrote to Elizabeth Bishop: "More invitations to be on dull committees, more books in the mail for blurbs, more tiresome doctor's degrees. Thank god, it can't go very far for a poet." Yet with him it went a long way. Every emolument, every prize, every attention was paid him.

Yet hard living—the boozing, the cigarettes, the huge doses of drugs to stay his illness—took their toll. By his late fifties, he was an old man with a weakened heart, who needed to go slowly on stairs and was offered help out of cabs. He wore his now grey hair long, his clothes were perennially rumpled, and a certain physical grossness set in. A friend of Jean Stafford's sent her a picture of the Lowell of these years, appending the caption, "The Ben Franklin *de nos jours*. Yuck!" Another photograph of him with his last wife, new son, and stepdaughter is pure Walker Evans.

"I think in the end, there is no end," Lowell wrote to Frank Bidart, "the thread frays rather than is cut." To his friend Peter Taylor, he added that he never really quite comprehended his own life, even though it was really the only subject of his poetry. "I think in a way, I never understood it, that it is [merely] addition not to be understood, just completed." Lowell's best

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book of poems, in my view, is his last, *Day by Day*, an elegiac work in which he tots up the manifold sadnesses of a painful life coming to its close and in which self-knowledge at last comes into play. Heart attack was the cause given on his death certificate, but Robert Lowell was in reality brought down by despondency and madness in his sixtieth year.

If W. H. Auden is correct—and it is by no means certain that he is—in averring that the world will pardon Rudyard Kipling and Paul Claudel for writing well, what about Robert Lowell, whose reputation has slipped considerably since his death? *Bien-pensant* politics and good old American democratic snobbery were key elements in its formation, and Lowell's may have been one of those literary reputations that needed him to be alive, stoking the fire to sustain its flame. His vocation may have been stronger than his gift. However much one admires his courage in fighting the madness that visited him all too regularly, it must be said that the poetry he used in part to fend it off does not leave much residue of joyousness or originality. One may talk about Robert Lowell as in the line of New England writers (the lost puritan of Paul Mariani's title), or as a late modernist, or as the poetic exemplar of the New Criticism, or anything else one likes, but finally one butts smack up against his terrible illness, his affliction, his madness. "Great poetry is greatly sane, greatly lucid," wrote Donald Davie, apropos of Ivor Gurney; "and insanity is as much a calamity for poets and for poetry as for other human beings and other sorts of human business."

No one fought harder to maintain sanity than Robert Lowell, using art as his weapon and his shield, but in the end the poor man never had a chance.

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CHARLES TOMLINSON

Journey

Travelling north,
I forget my book
in the act of looking.
I cannot hold in mind
half these fragments
I am leaving behind me.
Back to the engine,
I go on
drinking it in
this rearward flow,
as if there were nourishment there—
this whole journey
one backward glance
endlessly labile,
endlessly at a loss
to hold fast
to what it sees
disappearing past:
a snow prelude begins
(will it last?)
streaming along the wind
in the direction we have come from:
a grey-metal smokestack
on a grey skyline
across which the snow
goes slower on the eye now
until it fades—
lineside no-man's land,
gulls, corrugated roofs—
and the green of fields
suddenly free of snow
in a straggling net

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of unkempt hedgerows.
Mist in their rearward
out of which crows
come low-flying:
sun, even, then mist again
like a low-lying
smoke dispersing itself.
Birmingham Byzantine over-topped
by an Italianate tower,
and the plunge underground
into the station.
When the greens resume, snow
resumes with them—so *that*
was what mist was—
but it does not hold
and soon sun
has the shadow of our train
running beside it,
hugely lengthened out
by the going glare,
and the farms in their own
lengthening shadows
are snatched away from us
taking their lives elsewhere,
displacing us to a futurity
in which, coming to a poise,
we join the fugue of things
that do not only flee
but pass us on
to greetings that ground us,
to doorways, corridors, rooms,
unfamiliar books on the bedside table
and an unfamiliar town
breathing around us in the night out there,
a gigantic sleeper
never completely still
mouthing half-formed words
as the hours fill with a future
the journey has launched us towards.

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Directions

Just when you're sure that you're not getting near,
A tunnel of trees will suddenly appear
To undo doubt. You enter its half-light.
A mile more now and you will be in sight
Of a long, low house—that's ours. The tunnel, first—
A spot authority will one day worst
Because of its lack of "visibility"
That helps us sense far more than we can see.
My one regret's that you arrive by car
And not by boat; that these few metres are
Asphalt, not winding water—how this road
Would flow in majesty, a river-god,
If that were the case; then, this shuttered shade
Would filter the daylight through the dark it's made
To sparkle off the surface round your prow,
As off the chromium and paintwork now
Heaving into view. Already I
Can hear the gear change, as you leave the high
Ground for the low that we inhabit here,
Beside the dampness of a genuine river.
You have arrived. You need seek no further.

The Tree House

Descending the fieldslope,
suddenly one's eyes
catch sight
of the house on the rise beyond
through the boughs of an oak
where it now appears
to be suspended, all
one hundred tons of stone,
its chimneys smoking

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out of a warm interior
into a world that looks right
in the cold sunlight
of late-winter afternoon.
They say the King
came here
three hundred years ago
bringing—she called herself
"the Protestant whore"—
Nell Gwyn.
A likely story,
but if it happened
or did not, whoever
occupied that matrimonial bed
lay at the centre of this same
stone enclosure with its smoke
rising, the oak not yet grown
to extend its royal embrace
and make the whole house its own
as it does today
and raise it—a tree house—
up into the air.

Gibbet

This dangling man left hanging in the trees,
Wearing corduroy, check shirt and sack-cloth face,
Who shifts in the current of Atlantic breezes
In the sharpening light, with summer at an end,
Is the scarecrow that the keeper has strung up
From an ash-bough, to protect his fledgling birds,
And jerks into life at every autumn breath,
The guardian of their continuance and their death.

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LUCILLE DAY

"Worse than a Dozen Kids"

I own a switchblade knife. It has a black plastic handle with two brass buttons. One button is the lock. When you slide this button to its uppermost position, the knife won't open (a handy feature that prevents it from opening in your pocket). But when you slide the lock button all the way down, then press on the larger brass button in the middle of the handle, the blade pops out with a click, in less than a second, making a clean 180-degree arc.

There is a special way to hold a switchblade so that you won't cut yourself when it opens: you cradle it in your palm with your thumb on the large button, the tip of your index finger pressed behind the base of the blade, and your remaining fingers curled beside, rather than around, the handle, so as not to interfere with the opening blade. Bill Arthur taught me this when he gave me the knife. He was nineteen, a blueprint delivery boy; I was thirteen, in eighth grade.

I almost had to relinquish the knife not long after acquiring it. I was smoking a cigarette on the way home from school, and a boy named Ken was following me and threatening to tell on me for smoking. I pulled the knife from my purse, holding it just as Bill had shown me, and pressed the button. When the blade popped out, I waved the knife at Ken and said I'd cut him up into little pieces if he finked on me. He called my bluff and fink he did—not only for my smoking but also for threatening him with a switchblade.

The next day I was called to the office of Mr. Louis Ferry, principal of Piedmont Junior High School, and told that Inspector Lamp wanted to see me at the Piedmont Police Department, which was across the street from the school. I stopped to put the switchblade in my locker before going there.

"We have a report that you threatened a boy with a switchblade knife yesterday," said Inspector Lamp.

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"That's crazy," I said, "I've never even seen a switchblade."

"Why do you think the boy said that?"

I pulled my key chain from my purse. On it, I had a fold-out nail file in a unit that also included a tiny knife, less than one inch long. I held the handle and flicked my wrist. The little knife popped out.

Inspector Lamp said, "You'd better give that to me," and I took it off my key chain and handed it to him.

Then he asked me to empty my purse, which was close to the size of a suitcase (all the better for shoplifting), but only my makeup, brush, comb, wallet, tissues, pencils, pens, chewing gum, cigarettes, matches and a Hershey bar came tumbling out. He took the cigarettes and matches, then asked if I'd like to see his collection of switchblades.

His were much finer than mine. Some had bone, wood, or mother-of-pearl handles; many had much longer blades. "They're illegal," he said. "We don't give them back."

Nevertheless, I kept mine, which was tucked safely behind my math and history books in my locker. I wasn't about to hand it over to any cop. It was a symbol of who I was. It meant I didn't play by the rules; it meant I made up my own rules. It meant I was a rebel. It meant I was bad.

I've had my switchblade now for over thirty years. For two decades I kept it in my desk with other childhood mementoes in a pink box with "My Treasures" stamped on top. Now I keep it in my bedroom in a drawer in an antique oak dresser with other special things, like my gold charm bracelet, my children's milk teeth and my Phi Beta Kappa key.

I started seriously looking for a husband when I was twelve. I'd had enough of being a child, enough of being told what to do. I was unhappy at school; I resented homework; I didn't get along with my mother. Having seen movies like *South Pacific, Sayonara* and *A Summer Place*, I believed in true love. More than anything, I wanted Rossano Brazzi, Marlon Brando or Troy Donahue to come rescue me from my childhood. I wanted to be an adult, to be free, and to be loved.

My life began to change in the summer of 1960, after my sixth-grade graduation from Egbert W. Beach School in Piedmont, California. That summer I went to Camp Augusta, where

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Piedmont Blue Birds and Campfire Girls rode horses, swam, wove key chains from long strips of colored plastic, and painted daisies on salt and pepper shakers for their mothers. On the bus, which took us from the Piedmont Community Center to the Sierra foothills, we sang "100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall" and "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." But my fun was to be short-lived. Singing on the bus, I had no inkling that once at Camp Augusta, I would spend my time figuring out how to avoid the broom treatment.

The campers were assigned to groups called Tents, each of which included about ten girls. Every Tent had a real tent—a large, sturdy canvas one where we kept our clothes, changed our clothes, and slept when it rained. Most of the time, we slept in our sleeping bags on cots outside, under the Douglas firs, sugar pines and glittering constellations.

Every Tent also had a broom for sweeping the tent. Only this wasn't how the girls in my Tent used it. After breakfast my first morning at camp, I learned how the broom was really used, when Maureen and I, the only beginning swimmers in our Tent, went back to change into swimsuits for our lesson. The rest of our tent mates followed. As soon as Maureen, who was beginning to get breasts and curly black pubic hair that matched the hair on her head, was naked, one of the girls grabbed the broom and ran after her, threatening to swat her unless she ran outside, which she did, as everyone else laughed and cheered.

The broom treatment, as the girls called it, was administered whenever someone was changing her clothes and no counselors were near. My refusal to chase anyone with a broom and my strategies to avoid nakedness in the tent (changing my clothes in my sleeping bag or in the lavatory, wearing my underpants beneath my swimsuit, etc.) did not win me any friends, nor did my decision to wear shorts and blouses instead of cut-off Levis and sweatshirts like everyone else wore, even when the temperature was over 100 degrees. I spent a lot of time sitting on my cot, watching the squirrels and jays clean up the peanuts and sunflower seeds dropped by the campers and trying to figure out how to get out of Camp Augusta. On the fourth day, I limped to the infirmary, threw myself writhing onto a cot, and moaned, "I have a terrible stomachache. I want to go home."

"What kind of stomachache?" asked the camp nurse.

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"The kind that hurts here." I put my hand on my abdomen.

"Is there anything special about this stomachache?" she asked, leaning closer.

"No."

She sent tan, freckled Janet Driscoll, the favorite counselor of the campers, in to see me.

"Hi kid. How're you doing?"

"I feel sick."

"You don't look very sick to me."

"I have a stomachache."

"Listen, I know it's hard sometimes to be open with people you don't know very well," she said, sitting down beside me on the cot and leaning so close I could count the flakes of peeling skin on her sunburned nose, "but believe me, we're all your friends here. You have nothing to be afraid of. All of us know how it feels to . . ." She paused and looked at me knowingly before continuing, "to have cramps."

I started crying. "I'm not afraid; I'm just sick. Please call my mom and dad. I want to go home."

An only child, I usually got my way. My parents arrived the next day to take me home. I had no intention of telling them about the strange puberty rite I had witnessed. I knew that if I told my mother about the broom treatment, she would tell the camp director, who in turn would confront the girls. I did not want to be a tattletale.

As we pulled onto the highway in my father's blue and white '55 Oldsmobile, my mother, who had argued against my going to camp, said, "Lucille, I told you that you shouldn't come here. You should of listened to me. This was an awful drive for your father and me." She wiped her forehead with a handkerchief, brushing back her brown hair, which was starting to turn gray. "You're worse than a dozen kids," she added emphatically. "You don't know what a nuisance you are."

"Are you feeling any better?" my father asked. His face was flushed, his hair matted with perspiration. He was forty-two, seven years younger than my mother, but he wasn't holding up any better than she in the heat. Both of my parents were overweight and always had a hard time in hot weather.

I was about to say, "I'm feeling okay now," when I realized that

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I actually did have cramps. "No, I'm feeling worse. I'd like to stop at a gas station."

Several miles down the road, when we pulled into a station, I was feeling quite uncomfortable. No acting was necessary as I walked, slightly bent over, to the restroom.

Back in the car, I tried to sound casual as I said, "We have to stop at a drugstore. I need some Kotex."

My mother looked at me disgustedly. "You made us drive all the way up here for that! I knew it! That's what everyone at the camp said it was." She rolled her eyes and raised her voice, "That's nothing, you hear me, nothing! You didn't need to come home for that. Lucille, you just don't use your head."

This was mild criticism from my mother, who had been telling me ever since I could remember that I was nothing but a troublemaker and would be sorry when she was ten feet under and pushing up daisies. I was sick of it. I didn't want to listen to her nagging anymore, nor did I want to wear the Piedmont Junior High and High School uniform—a black or white pleated skirt, a white blouse with sleeves and a collar, and bobby sox with saddle shoes, tennis shoes, or oxfords—with the girls from Camp Augusta for the next six years.

I had heard many times that my Aunt Louise's cousin had met her husband at Dimond Roller Rink when she was eighteen. Maybe I could find a husband there, too. "I want to go skating at Dimond," I told my parents when we were almost home.

My mother said that I absolutely could not go roller-skating and break my neck. It took my father and me about a week to talk her into it. So it was that on a Friday night, I put on pink and blue plaid pedal pushers and a white ruffled blouse, tied my long golden hair back with a pink satin ribbon, and took a long look at myself in the mirror, wondering if I looked like a woman whom someone would want to marry. My best friend, Eileen, who was coming along, said, "Hurry up! Don't be so vain."

After skating around the rink a couple of times, I asked my father to leave. I continued to glide around the rink, surprised that I could do so without falling, since I had never been skating before, until the lights went dim and the announcer said, "Couples only." Everyone cleared the floor except one boy, who remained at the center of the rink, practicing leaps, spins and figures. By far the best skater there, he was either totally oblivious

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to everyone else or showing off for us. I was awed. "Couples only," the announcer said again. The skater, who was in midair, landed, spun around on one foot, and skated directly toward me. I did not attach any significance to this until he held out his hand and said, "Would you like to skate?"

The world turned in the palm of my hand. I had never imagined that finding a man would be so easy. He was tall and slender, with a high forehead, brown hair, lively brown eyes and a terrible complexion. The complexion didn't bother me: I was sure it would clear up in time.

"My name is Woody," he said. "What's yours?"

Could I tell him my name was Lucille? I had hated the name even before the kids in elementary school started calling me Lou the Seal. He was waiting; I had to think quickly. I said, "Lucy."

He would be starting his senior year at Oakland High School in September, he was an artist, and he hoped to win a scholarship to the California College of Arts and Crafts. Could I tell him I was twelve years old and starting seventh grade? "I'm fourteen and going into the ninth grade at Piedmont High," I said.

Woody asked me to skate during every "couples only" period that evening. At the end of the last one, he asked, "Are you coming back?"

"Yes."

"When?"

I didn't pause a nanosecond. "Tomorrow."

Eileen kept muttering, "You lucky bum," as we changed into our shoes.

I went skating every Friday and Saturday night that summer. During the week, I spent most of my time making skating skirts with felt, corduroy, and floral-print cottons. For some skirts I simply cut the fabric in a circle, made a hole for my waist, and added a waist band; for others I stitched together multiple panels that were narrow at the top to make a snug fit across my abdomen, but flared at the bottom to make the skirt full.

I felt like a woman and I wanted to look like one. I started curling my hair (no more pink ribbons!) and wearing green or purple eye shadow, bright pink lipstick, black eyeliner and black mascara. My mother, who wore no makeup, screamed, "You're a disgrace. You look like a flapper!" every time I left the house.

Woody and I were a couple. We always skated together during

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"couples only," and sometimes even during "all skate." When we weren't skating, we sat on a bench drinking Coca-Cola and watching the other skaters. He always put his arm around me, and sometimes I would turn my head just to admire his hand resting on my shoulder. After skating, he would walk me back to meet my parents at my Aunt Edna and Uncle Dave's house, two blocks away. I didn't want my parents to talk to him, though. I was scared to death my father would say something embarrassing like, "You know, she's only twelve years old."

One night toward the end of summer, when the last "couples only" period was announced, Woody said, "Let's leave."

"Why?"

"So that we can have some time alone before I have to get you home."

I led him to my cousin Jane's playhouse in my aunt and uncle's backyard. He wanted to sit on the floor, but I didn't want to get my skating skirt dirty, so we stood in the middle of the room. He put his arms around me and pulled me close to him. I knew he wanted to kiss me, so I looked up at him and smiled.

His mouth felt very hard against mine. This wasn't at all what I'd imagined kissing a boy would be like. I remembered reading about a girl's first kiss in a Beverly Cleary novel: "She had never thought a boy's lips could be so soft."

"Your lips are soft," I said, because I wanted this moment to be like the one in the book.

"Well, what did you expect?"

"I didn't know what to expect. I've never kissed a boy before."

He leaned forward to kiss me again.

On a Saturday in August my father took Eileen and me to the Santa Cruz Boardwalk. We rode the ferris wheel, the roller coaster called the Big Dipper, and the Wild Mouse, which felt at every turn as though it would fly off the track. Then we entered an arcade where there were rows of rectangular red fortunetelling machines the size of toasters. You put a penny in, asked a question with a yes or no answer, then pulled a lever. The answer popped out on a little card. I put my penny in, asked, "Will I marry young?" and pulled the lever. The answer popped out: "I will be truthful—signs say yes. Genius may have its limitations, but stupidity is not thus handicapped."

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All too soon, summer ended and I entered the dreaded Piedmont Junior High, the only public school I had ever heard of that required girls to wear uniforms. That year the uniform had actually been updated: tennis shoes and blouse styles other than middies were now allowed. To the best of my knowledge, these were the only changes that had ever been instituted. Except for the tennis shoes and blouses, the uniform was no different from the one my mother had worn from 1923 to 1929. But it wasn't only the appearance of the uniform that bothered me. I was also angry that girls had to wear this awful costume, while boys didn't have to wear any uniform at all. They could even wear shorts in hot weather.

I splashed Coke and orange juice on my skirts to keep them at the cleaners as much as possible. I cut holes in my tennis shoes and complained that oxfords hurt my feet. One morning, I wore a black blouse and a tight green, red and black plaid skirt with a fringed hem underneath my uniform, and on the way to school I peeled off the hated garments and threw them into a dumpster in front of a typical Piedmont home: a Jacobean mansion, complete with guest cottage, swimming pool, bathhouse, greenhouse, rolling lawns, and a Greek pavilion overlooking the tennis courts.

My family wasn't rich. The school and mansions were up in the hills, but I lived in "lower Piedmont" in a nondescript three-bedroom, one bath white stucco house near busy Grand Avenue. I had strong mixed feelings as I walked past the mansions each day. Sometimes I was simply disgusted that anyone should have so much. Other times I felt that the people who lived in those houses weren't important or real, that the real people were the families living in crowded apartments in nearby Oakland. Still other times, I fantasized that I would be rich and famous someday, not just rich enough to buy one of the mansions for Woody and me, but rich enough to buy three or four—maybe even a whole goddamn street—and share them with our friends from the skating rink.

I had already begun to get uniform cuts instead of excuses, and now I had gone too far for Mr. Ferry. He took one look at me and ordered me into his office: I would not be allowed to be seen in my V-neck blouse and tight plaid skirt in the halls of Piedmont Junior High.

"It isn't fair," I said, "that the girls here have to wear uniforms,

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but the boys don't—and girls at other schools don't. No other kids at public schools have to put up with this."

Mr. Ferry was a sturdily built man with a round face and gray crew cut. "Without the uniform," he explained, "the wealthy girls would have wardrobe competitions and the other (middle class) girls would feel shabby and excluded."

"That doesn't show much faith in the character of any of the girls," I argued.

"Well, it's a tradition," he said sternly, "and traditions should be respected. Without them, society would fall apart."

Try as I might, I couldn't convince him that the fate of twentieth-century society did not hinge on Piedmont girls' wearing black or white pleated skirts and white blouses with sleeves. After classes began and the other students were safely in their classrooms, where they couldn't see me leaving the school, a counselor escorted me out and drove me to the Little Daisy, where she told me to select a new uniform and charge it to my mother's account. I called my mother and begged her to say we couldn't afford it, but she refused.

I was a thorn in Mr. Ferry's side. Not wanting the same old schedule of classes everyone had always taken, I begged him to let me take shop instead of home economics.

"Absolutely not. It's against the rules."

"Why?"

"Girls might get hurt using the tools."

"Boys might get hurt, too. Besides, girls can burn themselves on the ovens in home ec."

"Those are risks that society is willing to take."

Mr. Ferry, who had encountered a lot of kids, could see that my rebelliousness ran deep. He asked my parents to get professional help for me.

They first took me to see a psychotherapist at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland. A lean man with intense eyes, he looked at me searchingly when we spoke. During our first session, he said, "Suppose twenty people are on a spaceship, on a long voyage that will require their being together for many years. Supplies are limited; decisions must be made regularly. How will the people make decisions? How will they get along?"

"They'll need rules; they'll need leaders." I was exasperated

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already. "I know what you're saying: the Earth is a spaceship. I want you to know I don't object to *all* rules, only stupid ones."

He raised his bushy eyebrows in an expression that showed more surprise than disapproval. Then he smiled. "That sounds reasonable," he said.

Four or five visits later, he began by saying, "This is our last session. I've told your parents that you're a normal adolescent and I see no point in continuing to waste my time, your time and their money."

Next, my parents took me to see a corpulent psychiatrist with a full black beard. He asked me what I thought the other kids thought of me. Why did the ones who were my friends like me? Why did others dislike me? Was I sure they disliked me? And so on. I thought I gave reasonable answers to the questions, but at the end of the session, he gave me two prescriptions. One was for a pill to calm me down. It made my tongue so heavy I could hardly speak. The other was for a pill to pep me up. It kept me awake while I was taking the one to calm me down. It also made my heart race and my hands tremble.

A few days after my visit to the psychiatrist, Phyllis Toso, who lived next door, invited me over to talk to her. She showed me a magazine article that told how psychiatrists had started using drugs to control the criminally insane. I quickly recognized my two pills in a photograph of these drugs.

As soon as I got home, I emptied all my pills into the toilet. The tablets sank to the bottom, but the capsules floated. I flushed, and as the water swirled down, I was pleased that all of the pills disappeared. Then I went to the kitchen, where my mother was washing dishes, threw the empty pill bottles onto the floor, and screamed, "I'm never going back to to see that crazy psychiatrist again!"

My parents asked Dr. Presant, our family physician, for his advice. He told them that counseling teenagers was one of his specialties and he would be happy to start meeting with me. Fiftyish, with thin, graying hair and a kind smile, he turned out to be a good listener and seemed genuinely sympathetic to my point of view. When we discussed the rules I didn't like at Piedmont Junior High, he said, "Lots of things in this world don't make sense, Lucy, and we need people like you to change them. Just

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wait until you grow up. Then pick your battles carefully and fight the ones you think you can win."

A few months later, I met his son, Bobby, at a party. "My old man is pretty cool," Bobby told me between swigs of beer, "and he knows a lot about delinquents, all of which he learned from me."

At school I was placed in accelerated math and English and an honors French class. I didn't want the French class, because it meant extra homework: I wanted a study hall, so that I could do my homework at school and spend my time at home on the more urgent task of designing skating skirts. I asked my mother to write Mr. Ferry a letter saying that the French course was too much work for me, that I needed more time to study, and would he please put me in a study hall instead.

Mr. Ferry called me into his office. He sat behind his desk and shook my mother's letter at me. "Baloney," he roared. "You have a good mind. Unfortunately, instead of putting it to work, you use it to get out of working. Do you know that I get several phone calls a day from parents begging me to put their son or daughter into that French class?"

"It's too hard for me. I need the time to study."

"You mean you want the time to play. You can fool your parents, but you can't fool me." He shook his head. "What a waste. I wish I had your mind; if I had your mind, nothing would stop me."

"What would you do?"

"I'd be a doctor or a nuclear physicist. I certainly wouldn't be sitting here arguing with kids like you."

I was startled. It sounded like a compliment. I knew I had scored high on standardized tests, but I was not convinced that this had any implications for real life. I had no idea whether I could really be a doctor or a nuclear physicist, but I felt flattered and began to suspect that deep down somewhere, Mr. Ferry liked me.

During the next few days, I thought about what he had said. My parents had never suggested that I think about going to college, perhaps because they had not gone to college themselves and just didn't think about it as something that a person, especially a girl, ought to do. My mother frequently told me her dream for my future: "I hope you marry a rich man. I hope you find your

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prince." The only college graduate in my family was my Aunt Louise, my father's brother's wife, who had taken night classes at U.C. Extension and graduated when she was almost forty. Mr. Ferry clearly expected me to go to college, so I told Phyllis Toso, whom I admired and trusted. She said, "The only reason a girl goes to college is to find a husband," and she warned me not to get bigheaded because I'd scored 100 percent on Mr. Swartzell's entry exam for accelerated math. "Girls aren't as good as boys at math," she said. "You'll find out when you get to high school."

Because Phyllis had admitted to me that she'd gotten pregnant by having sex with her husband, I believed everything she said. My own mother boasted the second immaculate conception. I'd asked her about sex after my friend Nancy told me what her mother had told her about where her baby sister came from. "That's an ugly lie," my mother said, making a face to show her disgust. "I'd never do a dirty thing like that."

Mr. Ferry gave me the study hall, but I didn't use it to do my homework. I used it to draw skaters and pass notes to anyone who would correspond with me.

Every day, I wrote in my diary: "I can't stop thinking about Woody. Now I know what love is really like." "I'm madly in love with Woody. I hope we can get married when I'm sixteen." "I feel like the luckiest girl in the world because Woody loves me." Etc. Woody had never said he loved me, but I assumed he felt the same way as I did.

Because I was taking seventh-grade classes, not ninth-grade ones, Woody knew that something was amiss. I admitted the truth, rather than letting him think I was a remedial high school student. His interest in me waned, but another boy at the rink started giving me a lot of attention. His name was Barry, but everyone called him Lucky. He didn't know as many jumps and figures as Woody, but he could do a perfect waltz jump and win at limbo. He had jet black wavy hair, a clear complexion and a mischievous grin. All the girls thought he was cute. Moreover, he was fourteen years old and in the eighth grade. He knew I was twelve, almost thirteen now, and thought that was fine. Could I love him instead of Woody? Yes.

I started smoking, although Woody and Lucky, both smokers themselves, advised me not to. I did it because it made me feel

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like an adult and because it was a way of being different from my parents, neither of whom smoked.

Soon Lucky and I were going steady. The only thing that could possibly be better, I thought, would be to marry him and have his baby. I knew we could get married if I got pregnant, but we never even talked about sex. The closest we ever came to discussing it was a conversation that went something like this: "Did you ever do it with Woody?" "No." "Good, I'm glad you're no whore."

Dimond Rink closed its doors for good at the end of the year to make room for the MacArthur Freeway, and the skating crowd moved to Chimes Skateland on the other side of town. Since this rink was nowhere near either my aunt and uncle's house or my own, I now needed a ride home every time I went skating. My father would have been happy to pick me up, but I preferred to get rides with the other kids. One time I accepted a ride from an older man who was a regular at the rink. I didn't think there was anything wrong with this, because he was driving several other kids home as well. But after taking everyone else home, he said we needed to talk and took me to a little restaurant about a mile from my house. We sat on stools at the counter. He ordered coffee and I ordered hot chocolate. While we waited for our drinks, he took my hand and said softly that he loved me. He also told me that he was sixty-three years old and that his wife didn't love him. Back in the car, he kissed me, fondling my breasts, and said he wanted to take me to the hills to look at the view. I was terrified. I told him that if I didn't get home soon I would be in a lot of trouble with my mother, but I would go to see the view with him some other time. "Do you promise?" he asked. "Yes," I lied.

I didn't tell my mother about this incident, because I knew it would have meant the end of skating for me. My mother, the nagger, now focused a lot on my friends at the rink. "You're in with bad company," she told me every day. "Those kids at the skating rink are no good: they all smoke. They're not your type of people. If you keep friends like that, you'll come to no good end. You're putting me in my grave." How could I tell her I'd met up with a genuine child molester? She was letting me go skating; I decided to leave well enough alone.

One night Lucky brought a friend to the rink. Steve Labate was part Italian, compact and muscular, with olive skin and dark hair.

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When Lucky introduced us, Steve smiled with mock flirtatiousness and said, "I'm in love." Lucky said, "You're too late. She's already taken."

I immediately liked Steve, not the way I liked Lucky and had liked Woody, but the way I liked Eileen. I wished Eileen were there at the rink to meet him, but her mother rarely let her come skating with me anymore, because she thought we were too young to be involved with boys.

Lucky, Steve, Woody and I often talked about going somewhere after skating, but we needed transportation. One possibility was to take my father's Oldsmobile (he had given me a key and started teaching me to drive, but so far, he had only let me practice at empty factory parking lots on weekends); another was to take Lucky's grandparents' car (he knew that his grandmother kept a spare key in a little box on her dresser). We talked about it every week, until we finally talked ourselves into doing it.

First we went to Lucky's grandparents' house, and while they slept, Lucky tiptoed into their bedroom and took the car key from the little box. We feared that the sound of the engine might wake them, so I steered while the three boys pushed the car to start it rolling down the driveway. As an extra precaution, we let the car roll a full block away from the house before starting it.

Lucky insisted on driving, although Woody had a license. We turned the radio on full blast to hear Neil Sedaka sing "Happy Birthday, Sweet Sixteen." Lucky drove fast, tailgating cars that didn't pull over for us and barely missing the cars we encountered at intersections.

We headed for my house, having decided that two cars would be more fun than one. The porch light was on for me. I had no idea if my parents were asleep or up watching television. We used the same strategy that had already worked for us: I steered while the boys pushed the car down the driveway. Woody insisted that I ride with him because he was a better driver than Lucky.

We went bowling, and after I'd demonstrated all my techniques for throwing gutter balls, we went cruising, with Woody and me in the lead in the Oldsmobile. We sped through the deserted streets until about 2:00 A.M., when we came to a red light. Woody stopped for it, but Lucky didn't. There was a screech of brakes, a sudden jolt and the sound of crunching metal. Ours were the only two cars on the street, and we had crashed.

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We all got out to examine the damage. My father's car had a pretty good-sized dent in the rear fender, but what really worried us was that the front end of Lucky's grandparents' car was a jumble of twisted metal. The engine was practically on the front seat. Thankfully, Steve and Lucky were alive and talking to Woody and me, but it was obvious that no one would ever drive that car again.

Woody shook his head. "You totaled it."

"What the hell did you stop for?" Lucky asked, pretending indignation.

"The light was red."

"What difference does that make? There weren't any other cars around. You could've gone right through."

"I didn't want to get a ticket."

"A ticket! You've been doing double the speed limit for the last two hours. What made you so concerned about a ticket now?"

About that time, a squad car arrived. Our names were radioed to the police station, and all of our parents were called. Because Woody had a driver's license, he was allowed to drive Steve and me home, but Lucky's father told the police to put him in jail.

Lucky lived in Hayward, about twenty miles away from me, so it had never been easy to get together during the week. To compensate, we'd started writing letters early on in our friendship. This correspondence really blossomed after the car wreck, because Lucky was on restriction and wasn't allowed to go skating. It was in these letters that we started plotting to run away together.

"I can't stand living with my mother anymore," I wrote. "We should dye our hair, take my father's car, and go to Mexico or Canada."

"My stepmother hates me and sometimes I think my father does, too," he wrote back. "If you can get the car, we will go away. I don't know where, but I think we will go to Los Angeles."

When we finally saw each other again, running away was all we could talk about. Lucky wanted to go to Los Angeles. His mother and sister lived in southern California, and he thought his sister would be able to help us.

On a sunny Thursday morning in early June, we rendezvoused at a prearranged corner in downtown Oakland. I took off my

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uniform skirt, under which I was wearing Bermuda shorts, and I threw both the skirt and my schoolbooks into a trash can, because I figured I wouldn't need them anymore. We went to the parking lot where my father always left his car while he was at Bank of America, where he worked as a loan officer. The attendant didn't give us a second look as we got into the Oldsmobile and drove away.

Our first stop was the home of John, one of Lucky's friends, who was cutting school that day to help us. He had offered us food and a blanket from his house, as well as a tank of gas, which he planned to siphon from the car of one of his neighbors. I thought we would be stopping only briefly at John's house, but John had a couple of other friends there, and all the boys started talking. John took a six-pack of beer from the refrigerator and opened a can for each of us.

"Won't you get in trouble for taking that?" Lucky asked.

"Not as much trouble as you'll be in for taking the girl and the car."

"I don't plan to get caught."

After a couple of beers, we all decided to go for a ride. "Show me what this thing can do," said John, as Lucky revved the engine and I opened my third can of beer.

"Not here. I know a place where it's safe," Lucky told him.

He took us to a dirt road near the San Mateo Bridge. A large sign said "No Trespassing." He drove past the sign, stopped the car and revved the engine, then floored it. We were off, flying over bumps and spilling our beer.

"Man, this thing's got more power than you'd think," said one of the boys.

We were about halfway between the "No Trespassing" sign and Highway 92 when Lucky said, "Don't look back." The rest of us turned around to see a police car, red light flashing, coming past the "No Trespassing" sign. Lucky kept the Oldsmobile floored, turned right onto Highway 92, and made another quick right into a restaurant parking lot. We laughed as the police car whizzed by the restaurant, light still flashing and siren screeching, on its way to the bridge.

Lucky said, "I've been on that road a hundred times and never seen a cop around."

When we pulled out of the lot, no cops were in sight. But

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instead of going back to John's house, we circled back to the road with the "No Trespassing" sign. Lucky drove past the sign and floored it, just as he'd done earlier.

Halfway down the road, John said, "This is just where we were when we saw that cop coming after us."

"Shit! He's after us again," yelled Lucky, looking in the rearview mirror, "and this time he's closer!"

Again, we turned right onto 92, then right into the restaurant parking lot, and watched the police car fly past us toward the San Mateo Bridge. About a minute later, another police car followed at full speed.

"Dumb fuzz," Lucky snickered.

"This shows why bank robbers get away," I said.

"Yeah," Lucky agreed, "the dumb fuzz are all busy chasing kids."

"And they can't even catch *us*," John added.

"Do you think they got our license number?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter. Your parents are going to report it anyhow," said Lucky.

"Maybe we should steal some license plates," I suggested.

"That's not a bad idea," said one of the boys. "The broad's got brains."

The boys decided to wait until after dark to steal the license plates and siphon the gasoline, so we went back to John's house to drink more beer.

When Lucky and I finally pulled onto Highway 17 to begin our journey to L.A., the moon was shining softly through a veil of clouds. The only clothes we had were the ones we were wearing: jeans, a plaid shirt and a sweat shirt for Lucky; a white blouse, a sweater and Bermudas for me. We had a can of tuna, two apples, a half loaf of bread, a quart of milk and some cookies, as well as a blanket, from John's house. I counted our cash and found that we had about three dollars between us, but this didn't worry me, because I'd done some financial planning for the trip: in my purse was my Bank of America savings account passbook, which would give us access to my life's savings, about seventy-five dollars.

We sped down the dark highway, leaving the San Francisco Bay Area farther and farther behind. Before long, we could pick up only static on the radio, but I kept thinking I could hear music: Elvis Presley, Jimmy Clanton, Dick and Deedee. I searched for a

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station, struggling to tune in the ghostly music playing far off in my head. The static grew louder; the static grew softer. The radio crackled and hummed, but I knew it was trying to make music for me.

"It's trying," I said.

"It's very trying," Lucky retorted. "Please turn that thing off."

I turned the radio off. I didn't want to argue now, when I was on the verge of a new life. I envisioned both of us finding jobs in Los Angeles. After we started working, I would get pregnant. Then we would get married. A thrill ran through my body as I thought about it.

Ravenous, I took out the food and discovered we didn't have a can opener for the tuna. Well, so what. We'd had tuna sandwiches earlier at John's house. By midnight we'd consumed everything else from John's house except the blanket.

Sometime in the middle of the night, we pulled into a coastal town that consisted of a gas station, a gift shop, a restaurant and a few houses. Lucky said, "We're almost out of gas. I think we should stay here until the station opens in the morning."

"I feel like sleeping, anyhow," I said.

We turned around and drove a couple of miles back up the highway to a turnout overlooking the ocean. "Do you want the front seat or the back?" Lucky asked.

"I'll take the front."

He kissed me gently, barely touching his lips to mine. Then he kissed my forehead and went to the back seat, and we both fell asleep well before the car grew cold.

When I woke, the sky was uniformly gray. The sea too was gray, but with a slight metallic sheen and white caps to break the monotony. Shivering, I reached to the back seat to take John's blanket from under Lucky's feet. This woke him, and he climbed into the front seat and started the car as I wrapped myself in the blanket.

The Oldsmobile had hubcaps with spokes that flashed when the wheels were turning. My father had told me that these "spinner" hubcaps were very expensive. "Let's try to sell the hubcaps to the attendant," I said, as the Oldsmobile came to a stop at the pump block of the dusty two-pump station. "My dad says he paid a lot for them."

"I'll talk to him," said Lucky.

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"Okay, try to get at least twenty-five dollars. I think they're worth more than a hundred."

Lucky was smiling when he came out of the little office. I thought he'd gotten over twenty-five dollars.

"Well, how much did you get?"

"A tank of gas."

This was the first time I'd ever been really mad at a man, but I didn't want to start a fight with him. "Next time let me do the bargaining," I said.

Our next stop was a café in Santa Maria, where we sat in a purple and orange vinyl booth and consumed pancakes, sausages, scrambled eggs, orange juice and coffee. I felt good after eating, as though we would soon find jobs and a nice place to live, as though nothing bad could ever happen to a girl with a full stomach.

We reached Santa Barbara before noon. Palm trees swayed in the wind, white sand stretched in a crescent along the sea, and purple hills overlooked Spanish-style buildings with red tile roofs. I thought it was the most beautiful city I'd ever seen.

It was time to go to the bank. I was worried that my parents might have thought of my bankbook and told the police, who would have alerted the bank officials, who would now report me when I tried to withdraw money. But we were broke. I had to take my chances.

And I had another idea: we could sell my wristwatch, which was gold with a small diamond on either side of the face. We knew that a pawn shop would be the place to go. With the hubcap experience fresh in my mind, I wanted to go in myself, but Lucky insisted that girls never went into pawn shops, that the proprietor would know I was a runaway and call the police. So he went to a pawn shop while I went to Bank of America.

My heart was racing and my palms were clammy as I handed the withdrawal slip to the teller. She looked at me skeptically. "Why are you withdrawing so much money?" she asked.

"I'm on my way to Disneyland with my dad. He works for Bank of America. I saved the money just for this trip."

With my seventy-five dollars in my purse, I went back to the car, where I had to sit on the hood to wait for Lucky. He had the key.

"Well, I see you didn't get arrested," he yelled from half a block away.

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When he got closer, I said, "You'd better be careful what you say, or we *will* get arrested." Then, eagerly, "How much did you get for the watch?"

"Twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars! That was real gold and real diamonds!"

"When you pawn things, you never get what they're worth."

"You just don't know the value of things. How do you think we're going to live until we find jobs?"

"I told you my sister would help us. You think you're pretty goddamn smart, but you don't know everything," he snapped.

"I know that people will take advantage of you if they can." I paused to scrutinize my future husband before screaming, "And you seem dumb enough to let them do it!"

So this was what adulthood was like: anger, frustration, uncertainty, fighting about money. We didn't speak again until we reached Los Angeles, where the sky, pearlescent gray with smog, reminded me of the way the sea had looked that morning. In bumper to bumper traffic, we inched our way toward Newport Beach, where Lucky's sister, Gail, lived with their mother.

"School'll be out when we get there," he said.

"Are you still mad at me?" I asked.

"I can't stay mad at you—you know I love you," he said, reaching out to pull me closer to him on the wide front seat.

"I'm sorry about what I said. I love you, too."

Late in the afternoon we reached Newport Beach, where everyone wore sunglasses and shorts and had very tan legs. Lucky, who knew his way around because he had lived there, suddenly swerved into a parking place. "I see Gail!" he said, pointing to a girl with a dark ponytail in a grocery store parking lot. "Wait here."

He was out of the car and running toward Gail before I had a chance to ask why I should wait in the car instead of going with him. Then, almost as quickly, he was running back toward the car.

"My mother's in the store," he said. "We have to get out of here!"

"What did Gail say?"

"She said we should go home."

"Can't she help us?"

"She'll be in a lot of trouble if she gets caught, but she's going to try. She's going to meet us tomorrow."

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We checked into a motel that night, and it felt really luxurious to be in bed with Lucky. I tried to remember another time when I had been completely comfortable making out, but all I could come up with was images of conduits, tool sheds, cars and my cousin Jane's playhouse. So this was what it was like for grown-ups. Well, they certainly had it good. We kissed and caressed for a long time. I was wearing my bra and pants; Lucky was wearing his shorts.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said. "I feel responsible."

"You're not hurting me."

"I could hurt you, but I'm not going to."

We slept through the hours when the other guests at the motel were packing up and driving off. When I finally forced myself out of my dreams of marriage and babies, the Oldsmobile was the only car left in the parking lot.

I decided to go to the beach while Lucky met Gail. It was a muggy, overcast day. Lying on John's blanket, I quickly fell asleep, despite the many hours of sleep I'd had the night before. A couple of hours later, when Lucky came to wake me, the whole left side of my body was bright red.

"I didn't know you could get sunburned when the sun isn't out," I said.

"There are a lot of things you don't know."

We went to a shopping mall, where I bought a tight blue cotton skirt, a plaid blouse and iridescent blue flats to wear when I started looking for a job on Monday. It still wasn't clear whether Gail would be able to help us. I hoped she'd find someone we could stay with until we got our first paychecks.

That night Lucky and I went to Balboa Island. After having hamburgers and milkshakes for dinner, we saw *Never on Sunday*, which wasn't romantic enough for my taste. The next day, Sunday, we went to the Pike at Long Beach to ride the octopus and Cyclone Racer and chat with the man who was turning to stone. When we got back, Gail gave us the bad news: she had no money to give us, and she couldn't find a place for us to stay.

Lucky said, "We're going home."

I protested. Having tasted freedom, I did not want to give it up so quickly, although I realized that going home was the sensible thing to do.

We took the valley route because it was shorter than the coast

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route and we wanted to conserve gas. When we got to Fresno, I said, "I'm starving. Let's get something to eat."

"You'll have to steal it," said Lucky, as he pulled into a supermarket parking lot.

We entered the store separately. I went to the fruit and vegetable section and put two red apples into a brown paper bag. Then I put a piece of cheddar cheese and a package of cookies into the bag and walked out of the store.

"What did you get?" I asked as Lucky started the motor.

He held up a package of hot dogs. He was smiling, pleased with himself.

"That's disgusting. Couldn't you have gotten anything better than that? We'll have to eat them cold."

"Beggars can't be choosers," he said.

By now, I was eager to get home, not so much because I was homesick (although I was beginning to miss my father), but because I was sick of Lucky.

After sleeping in the car again, we got back to Oakland on Monday morning and surprised my father at Bank of America. He hugged me, then shook Lucky's hand, saying, "How good to see you." We were grubby and disheveled; I wondered if my dad's co-workers knew we had run away. Instead of calling my mother, he suggested that we surprise her, too.

"Evelyn! Evelyn!" he hollered as we entered the house. "Some important people are here to see you."

"You should of called first," she yelled, sounding annoyed, from the dining room.

Lucky and I walked into the living room so that my mother, who was standing just beyond the dining room table, could see us. Suddenly, she looked very happy.

"Dick, you shouldn't trick me like that," she said. "Where did you find them?"

"I didn't find them. They picked me up at the office."

She turned to me. "Where have you been?"

"Los Angeles."

"Why did you go there?"

"I needed a little vacation."

"This is no time to joke," she said. "Well, I'd better call the police to let them know you're back."

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About five minutes later, Officer Vasey, the Piedmont juvenile officer, arrived. "I have to take the kids to Juvenile Hall," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"You've broken the law. You ran away, and a police report was made."

"But we came back."

"And you stole a car."

"But we brought it back."

"And you stole license plates."

"We'll give those back, too."

"I still have to take you to Juvenile Hall."

Juvy was a big ugly green building on a hill above 150th Avenue in San Leandro. A heavyset woman at the front desk of the girls' division pointed to a large book and told Officer Vasey to enter my name and the charge against me. He wrote, "Grand theft, petty theft, and runaway." The woman looked at it and said, "Juveniles are booked on only one charge. Which is the most important?"

"Runaway."

"Then cross the other things out."

I wondered if Officer Vasey had ever taken anyone to Juvy before.

From a cabinet in front of the desk, the woman took a frayed and faded blue cotton blouse and a similarly frayed and faded cotton skirt printed with little blue flowers. The skirt looked too big, the blouse too small. The woman said she had no other sizes. Then she asked for my purse, saying that I could keep one lipstick and one eyebrow pencil.

Another woman came to escort me to a bathroom. She gave me a comb, toothbrush, bar of soap and bottle of shampoo, and ordered me to strip. I felt degraded. Satisfied that I wasn't smuggling any drugs or weapons into Juvy (although she didn't say so, I supposed this was what she was looking for), she told me to shower and wash my hair. The water was lukewarm, and the shampoo smelled like rotten eggs. It was one of the fastest showers I have ever taken. But I needn't have rushed. In my baggy skirt and tight blouse, with dripping wet hair and carrying my lipstick and eyebrow pencil, I was put into solitary confinement.

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Pawnee Dust

Goodbye, I see the horsemen mounting,
the lean dogs yapping in the dust.
Cottonwood pole and buffalo hide
are rolled and lashed, Gray Eagle's
woman carries the smoldering fire.

The young are laughing, they have no
burden yet, the broken camp is play.

Goodbye, the sun already rises,
bones of the last hunt whiten
in its rays. The plains are there
before you, beyond are grass
and water, vast untroubled herds.

Great Tirawa watches you, there's
nothing more to say. Good hunting west.

Carmel Valley, 1953

The Way West

Maybe there'll come a time again
when the dawn will find
  us ready—the breakfast fires burned out
and banked with sand, their
remnant smoke curling up unstirred

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by any wind; and the chill,
  still dewy air will find us ready, the heavy
gear stowed and lashed,
the patched tents struck, the stock
roped in and hitched . . .
  And one voice calls from a full belly, and
one hand ahead is lifted
and motioned forward—then shoulders
to yoke, buttocks to leather,
  wood squeaking on wood, the wheels beginning
to roll, cries on the warming
air. And the way is down into
the valley, with grass,
  to dust and running water, to buffalo dung
and the far hills,
before the sun drinks west.

Provincetown, 1951

Evening Change

Beautiful light down there
where the dark hills open
  toward the sea,
and the promontory groves
show like the ruined towers
of castles older than thought—
  Even this sordid valley
seems sweet and hallowed now,
where birds cross in the twilight,
unwatched by jealous eyes.

Carmel Valley, 1952

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I Will Tell You how It Was in My Country

In those days

forming that known world
of much sun

and little rain,
the broadest of valleys, and a river,
at once contained and containing.

Where the river flowed
the ground was fertile,
crops were grown, and trees,
and among the trees
were wells

and people bathing.

Native stone
raised a city,
the city housed a swarm
who were
particular of trade and office,

and the gods had temples
raised to their diligence.

The sweat of myriads changed
the horizon,
dynasties were built upon it,
and evidence of wealth
and nobility was seen among many.

So indulged, the divinities
were kind, and for a thousand years
no conqueror appeared.

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There
was born, and lived,
prospered, declined and died,
a man,
honorably buried,
very long ago.

New York, 1951

Procession

Long, wavering files of ghostly children
clad in long, white gowns,
passing through the ancient, echoing manor.

Each carries a lighted candle, and the yellow
flame flickers on each innocent face.

No head is bowed, each looks before him
as room after room is passed,
each heavy door swung slowly open

at their approach: rooms silent
and bare of all save some faded tapestries

hung on the granite walls, and here and there
a suit of standing armor dully
gleaming as the flutter of their candles

throws sudden light into the corners,
lends the vaults a frieze of shadows

and, passing, leaves the rooms in former
darkness. The shuffle of their
footsteps down the stone corridors wakens

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ancestral whispers; invisible guardians
watch them, the toil of centuries

precedes them in the smells and stains that
linger. Now the hours dwindle,
a greyness leaks from high slit windows

and shows the files before the last door,
halted there, their candles blowing out

in a freshening draft. And now begins
their gothic singing,
a sacred canon swelling on the heavy silence:

voice after voice beginning, summoning
echoes from countless forgotten

passages, ringing in the stones of buried
tombs. The great door slowly
swings, and overhead a bell begins to toll.

Carmel Valley, 1953

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DEAN DONER

The Comfort of This World

Harald Ericsson was living in Manhattan, it seemed, because he'd answered his wife's question without thinking. He and Ruth had to decide where they were going to retire, but they'd not decided where that would be, except it wouldn't be Cleveland or Minneapolis or any of the other places they'd lived, and they would not retire in California or Arizona, Texas or Florida. New England was a possibility, as was the Pacific Northwest or the mid-Atlantic states. They wanted seasonal changes if not as stark as those in Minneapolis or Cleveland. Ruth was intrigued by the idea of Vermont or New Hampshire. On other days she thought she might like Santa Fe or Albuquerque, Seattle or Portland. The trouble was they were all so different.

They finally agreed the winters in the Pacific Northwest were too wet and cloudy.

Ruth quoted:

> O suns and skies and clouds of June
> And flowers of June together.
> Ye cannot rival for one hour
> October's bright blue weather.

"You really want to go to New England," he said.

"For October, anyway. I'm not sure about January and February."

They put the subject aside.

One November evening, when they were both reading, Ruth suddenly asked, "If you had to decide where to retire without me, where would you go? If you were all alone, absolutely nothing to influence you except where it is *you* want to be. Where would you go?"

He immediately said, "New York. I'd live in Manhattan."

"Manhattan!"

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How could such an idea have popped into his head? He grinned, like an adolescent. "That seems silly, doesn't it? But if I *were* alone, I wouldn't want to live in the country or even a small town. I'd want to be where there are museums and concerts and lots of movies to choose from. And I'd want to be close to the kids." Their son lived in Manhattan. Their daughter lived in Poughkeepsie.

"Well, then, let's retire in New York."

"That *would* be silly. As long as we're together the country or a small town is fine. We couldn't afford New York. And you'd hate it. You want to get away from cities." Reading and long walks, cattails and ponds were what she wanted.

They were silent, looking at each other. He asked, "Well, where would you go if you were alone?"

"I don't know. I can't think of myself as being alone. I can't think of myself at all without you."

By January—Harald was retiring in June—Ruth decided they shouldn't try to make a decision. They should rent their house in Cleveland and then rent something in New England to see if they liked the winter as much as the summer and October's bright blue weather. Or rent something in Santa Fe for a year to see if they liked that. It would be terrible to sell their house and buy another in a place it turned out they didn't like. They could go anywhere. It would be easy to make a mistake.

In March Ruth's car was hit by a bus. It came through an intersection, slammed into the door on the driver's side, and pushed her car against a parked car. The bus driver was already dead of a heart attack. Ruth was pinned in her car for two hours. She died in the hospital the following day.

They had been married thirty-seven years and had not been apart in that time for as much as a week. He was neither comforted by other people nor distressed that they lived when Ruth was dead. He was indifferent to others, indifferent to life itself, he thought, but he found it maddening that solid objects sat in their accustomed places as though nothing had happened. He hated the solidity of all familiar things—tables, chairs, even the walls and doors. He told his daughter to take all that had belonged to Ruth, her clothes, shoes, everything in her dressing table, and get rid of them. He wanted the dressing table gone, too. Only by not asking that everything be taken out of the house,

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that the house be stripped as bare as he, had he understood he would, eventually, recover. But he did want it bare.

People were concerned about him. They were cautious. They pretended they were not, but it was obvious.

He could do nothing to reassure them.

At night—he slept in the guest room while his daughter slept in her parents' room—he was haunted by something that had happened forty-five years earlier, in 1943. He had gone home, on a ten-day furlough, to the small town in Illinois where both his parents and his grandfather lived. His grandmother had died a week before his furlough. His grandfather was eighty. One afternoon he asked Harald to drive him downtown to the bank. There were papers he had to sign. On the way he told Harald it was very hard to go on, very hard to care whether you signed papers or didn't sign them. He told Harald he remembered, as if it were yesterday, courting Harald's grandmother with a horse and buggy. That was in 1880. They lived on farms six miles apart. Not only had she been the prettiest girl in the vicinity, she was mischievous, more high-spirited and tomboyish than girls were supposed to be in those days. That was why he liked her, that and the fact she was pretty. She played tricks on him. He hadn't been sure she liked him, but she had. They'd been married within a year. They had just celebrated their sixty-third wedding anniversary. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He made no effort to wipe them away.

Harald had not known what he could possibly say. He didn't want to say he understood, because he supposed he really didn't. He couldn't just say something inadequate like "I'm sorry, Grandpa." So he drove carefully and slowly, embarrassed and feeling miserable.

When he parked in front of the bank, his grandfather was crying too hard to go in. He held in his hands a tiny gold pen and looked at it as tears dropped on the front of his shirt. Harald drove him back home. His grandfather died a week and a half after Harald returned to his Army post. He never forgot how inadequate people were, how there was no way to understand and no way to comfort.

His daughter, Liz, rearranged the furniture in the living room. That helped. He could enter that room without immediate pain.

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Nothing could be done about the dining room. With the china cabinet and buffet against the walls, the dining table had to stay in the middle of the room. Oddly, the easiest place for him to be was the kitchen. He had not helped Ruth in the kitchen and did not know where things were kept. Almost every cupboard was strange.

He had to work through the rest of March, April, and May. His daughter asked him what he planned to do in June. She had to get back to her family in Poughkeepsie. They were taking their vacation in July, but it would be fine if he wanted to visit them for the month of August. He thanked her but said he thought that wasn't a good idea. She wondered if he would visit his brother, who lived in Denver. He said he didn't think so. Did he have any idea where he would retire? She assumed he would not want to sell the house.

He said he was going to live in New York.

The look on her face was not just surprise. He could tell she thought it a bad idea and wondered if she thought he shouldn't live in New York or was worried that he would be too close, a burden.

"Did you talk to Hal about this?" she asked. Hal was her brother, Harald Ericsson, Jr.

"Yes. I asked him to check on apartment prices for me."

"What did he say?"

"He said he would."

"No. I mean about living in New York?"

"He looked the same way you did. But that's where I'm going to live."

He would never have chosen New York if Ruth had not asked him that sudden, strange question. Now that he did think about it, there was no alternative. He was not going to take an apartment in Cleveland. They had lived there only seven years and had no close friends. Their friends dated from earlier days, and they were now scattered. No place had any claim on him. He was not going to live in a retirement community and play golf and bridge every day with the same old people as they grew frail and died. As he grew frail and died. He wondered what single retired people did if they didn't move to Manhattan. Bore themselves to death in a dull compound in the desert or under the palms? Burden their children?

As early as the end of March, he began selling his furniture. He continued to sleep in the guest room, and he sold the bedroom

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furniture and all the furniture in the dining room. He ate in the kitchen. More slowly he sold the living room furniture. It was as though he were camping in his house, but there was no danger, when he opened the door in the evening, of imagining that Ruth might be somewhere in the echoing, empty rooms.

When his children finally understood he was serious, he was going to move to New York, a solution turned out to be easy. Hal wanted to move to the East Side, and Harald moved into Hal's rent-stabilized apartment on West 86th. Hal assured his father that since they were members of the same family and especially since they had the same name, it was legal without the rent increasing to market value. Later he said such arrangements were under litigation, but Harald was not to worry. "Don't sweat it," Hal said. "I'll handle it. People do it all the time. *Everyone* does it. It's okay."

Harald was uneasy. For the first time uncertainty clouded his plans, but he could not afford the apartment at market value. Well, Hal told him, they certainly weren't going to do anything until the litigation had run its course, and they saw how that came out.

Hal had the apartment ready with a new bed, a chest of drawers, and a small round dining table and four chairs. He left his couch and two chairs in the living room. He had not thought to provide bookcases though he knew his father loved books. Harald brought fifteen cartons of books with him. They had to stay, at first, packed in a corner of the living room, but Harald was glad to have the job of buying bookcases. It kept him busy the first week, and he discovered, in the process, how to find things in the confusion of Manhattan and how to get them delivered to his twelfth-floor apartment. He next bought small tables for his television and stereo and for magazines and his coffee cup when he read.

The first rule he imposed on himself was that Hal and Liz would have to call him. He had not moved to New York to insert himself into their lives. He certainly did not want them worrying about him every day, feeling they had to remember to call him, which they would do if it seemed he needed to talk with them. Since there was no one else to call him, he sometimes let the phone ring without answering. He told them, later, he'd been out. He'd been busy. There was a lot he had to do. They had to

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learn—he had to learn—what distance could sustain their love yet keep it untouched by the numbing sense of duty.

Sometimes, when he answered the phone, it was someone calling Hal. He said, as simply as possible, that Mr. Ericsson had moved but he had the new number. Three times callers informed him he sounded exactly like Hal. One of them, a woman, persisted, thinking Hal was playing a trick. He explained that he was Hal's father. "Wow, how nice!" she said. "That's really neat. Maybe I'll get to meet you." He was certain when he had been Hal's age he no longer knew anyone who said "Wow."

Something about the calls disturbed him. There were quite a number of them, and often whole sentences poured into his ear before he could make the caller understand he was not Hal. Everyone Hal knew talked very fast, as though the rush of the city pushed their words along the wire. Sometimes there were obscenities of a gentle and hearty nature. Harald had never known anyone as well and yet as casually as these callers seemed to know Hal. "Hey, you old fart. Where've you been?" one caller asked. Harald thought it odd to greet someone that way if you didn't know him well enough to know he'd moved. It seemed even odder that the caller, when he found he was not talking with Hal, was not embarrassed.

He suggested Hal let his friends know he had moved. Hal assured him he'd done that. The people who called now he'd not spoken with or seen in months and, apparently, had no expectation he would ever see or talk with them again. "They're not *friends*," he explained. "They're just people I know. Just people around. You know?"

Harald did not know. "I never got telephone calls from 'just people around,' " he said.

"So, that's New York. You get to know a lot of people you don't know."

Liz was concerned that he didn't come every weekend to Poughkeepsie. He had gone twice in June. He explained that he liked visiting her family and he liked seeing his grandson, though the boy was fourteen and usually off someplace and not interested in his grandfather.

"New York is such a *lonely* place," Liz said. She said it with such woe he understood it was something she knew nothing about. It

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must be the proper opinion to have in Poughkeepsie, and it must always be said, he guessed, with such a sigh.

He was certainly not as lonely as he had been in those first terrible days in March, when Liz and Hal and his brother and sister-in-law had all been in Cleveland, trying to comfort him. He could not explain this to her, and he didn't try. He was not lonely because he lived in New York but because he no longer had Ruth. The word "lonely" apparently had two meanings. He would now forever be lonely. But he was not lonely in New York. He would have felt more alone in any other place.

How could he feel alone in New York? Just to step out the door onto 86th Street was to enter a hum that was a part of the air itself, an invitation that made him feel light and unencumbered. The street was never crowded but never entirely deserted. Turning onto Columbus Avenue, he felt as though he entered a different part of the city. The traffic flowed downtown with greater urgency than the traffic on 86th. The buses on 86th were sedate. They huffed from the Park to Columbus, wheezed to a halt, rested a bit, then slowly made their way west or slowly returned eastward. The buses which came over the hill north of 86th on Columbus roared down the Avenue, paused briefly, and fled downtown as though pursued. Patterns gave a rhythm to the street. Even in midday Columbus might be almost empty before a phalanx of buses, taxis, cars, and trucks appeared over the hill and raced downtown, a traffic light unseen beyond the hill halting and releasing convoys.

He came to recognize people in the neighborhood. The woman who pulled a two-wheeled cart behind her each day on Columbus he met once on 72nd and Central Park West, and he worried that she had strayed too far. She looked always down at the sidewalk. Did she know where she was and could she get home? A man marred beyond his years shuffled between 86th and 85th streets, wandering up one side of Columbus Avenue and down the other, unable to escape whatever caged him in that one block. A tall brunette burst from his apartment building every morning and flew away like a bird. Even before she was out the door, her arm waved in the air. If a taxi were not available, she stood far into the intersection, waving, and lo, a taxi always appeared and she slung inside and was gone. He saw her only flying away, never returning. Her life must be, he thought, as

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erratic as her flight. She did not care whether she went east, south, or west. She fled in the first taxi she could find.

Faster than he would have thought possible, he became recognized in the neighborhood, which was like a little village. No one knew his name except the old man in the laundry—and his name might as well have been a number—but he was acknowledged as a regular in the grocery store, the little shop where he bought newspapers and magazines, and the shabby place where he bought lettuce and, occasionally, green beans or peas. When he entered these stores, he was always greeted. Had he stopped coming, he knew he would be neither remembered nor missed. He had not known recognition could be coupled with anonymity. He also did not know why he liked that feeling. It suited him. He was content to be one of seven million people creating the hum of the city, and he was content to be unknown.

He ate regularly at the diner near his apartment building. The food was good, and the prices were lower than they would have been in Cleveland. He ate breakfast in the diner and had lunch or dinner there two or three times a week. He would buy the *Times* and read it while he ate breakfast, amazed to find that he could eat with hands blackened by newsprint. It gave him an odd pleasure to look at his dirty hand holding a piece of toast. It made him seem a stranger to himself while being like everyone else around him. How much ink did New Yorkers consume each morning, he wondered, and said to himself, "I do my part."

He read the reviews and the day's events. He only skimmed the news, another mark of the changes taking place. He had always followed the news carefully, subscribed to newsmagazines and listened to the news on television. Now, what was happening in Africa or Europe, Central America or Asia didn't interest him. In any event, it was always the same news, week after week. What was important was what was happening in Manhattan. He attended concerts of Renaissance and Baroque music, no longer wanting to listen to nineteenth- or twentieth-century music with their pretensions that they understood and could portray individual pain.

He preferred clear, communal, and anonymous music or the clean, formal structures of Mozart. "Mostly Mozart" kept him occupied in July and August, though he ventured into Central Park and walked in the Midtown streets. He was delighted by the choices he had in movies, going to little theatres throughout the

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city to see films he had never heard of, sometimes in languages he did not understand. He watched the people attending these events, surprised at how easy it was to be an observer without anyone seeming to notice, anyone seeming to care.

Liz wanted him to get a dog or cat for company. She could not understand. She worried about him, she said, a burden he carried through his days. No one escapes completely free, he told himself, and tried not to think about it.

Hal made hurried telephone calls once or twice a week. "Just checking," he would say. "Everything okay? I wonder how long it will be before I call and a woman answers the phone."

"You won't hear that," Harald said.

"It'd be okay. Liz and I could handle it. You ought to think about it. It'd be good for you. And good for some woman, too. Don't you see all those classifieds? The city is full of sophisticated, intelligent, sincere women mad for art, music, long hikes and very long conversations." He laughed.

"I doubt that," Harald said.

"Take care," Hal said. "Call you in a couple days."

Apparently Liz and Hal discussed him. He had not imagined that. It was another thing weighing him down, like Liz's worry and the possibility that he was not paying the legal rent for his apartment.

"How's that litigation coming?" he once asked when Hal called.

"What litigation? What are you talking about? No one's suing me."

"The litigation about taking over a rent-stabilized apartment."

There was a long silence. Harald thought he heard a sigh, though it might have been the city humming through the wires. "It's all right," Hal said. "Members of the same family can move in and out. It's okay. Stop worrying."

Harald was silent.

"Look, how about dinner tonight?" Hal asked. "I've found a new place that's really good and not expensive. I'll pay. The treat's on me. Okay? Besides, there's someone I want you to meet."

"You don't have to worry about me," Harald said.

"Who's worrying?" Then he added, "So, how about tonight?"

Harald said he had a ticket to something.

Five minutes later Liz called. She wanted to tell him his grandson had decided to go out for the football team. She wondered if he were all right. She wondered if he would like to

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come up the next day, Sunday. He hesitated but said that would be fine. She was *very* pleased, she said. She might just invite some other people and have a brunch. There were people she needed to pay back.

That afternoon he decided to walk to the Museum of Natural History. Columbus Avenue was not as interesting as usual. He walked several blocks without noticing anything. He did not have a sense of the vast spread of the city. The street, instead, was cramped, filled with bus fumes. The sidewalks were crowded, there was more scaffolding and construction than he remembered, and he had to swerve around people who stood talking with each other or who moved suddenly away from shop windows. He passed the Museum and walked on to Lincoln Center, where he sat under an umbrella and had a cup of coffee.

For the first time in months he let himself think about Ruth. He wanted her sitting in the chair next to him, talking and making her shrewd little comments. He reached out and touched the arm of that chair and closed his eyes. But he was afraid tears would come, so he clasped his hands in his lap and sat up straight, as though there were no weight at all on his shoulders, an anonymous spectator having coffee in the plaza.

He watched a young couple with a little girl. The woman had a long patchwork skirt and dirty sandaled feet. The man had a ponytail down his back and an earring in one ear. Yet they acted as though they were a perfectly normal family on an outing, eager to make sure their little girl had a good time. A middle-aged couple, sightseeing, studied the front of the buildings and the fountain and the plaza itself with undisguised pleasure. Two men with briefcases (wasn't it Saturday?) strode by as though they were marching. A young girl drifted past, setting her feet down with such delicate precision she had to be a ballerina, he thought, then wondered if she were just pretending. At the next table two young women, both wearing gold bracelets and chains, talked so eagerly they interrupted each other.

Hal had obviously immediately telephoned Liz. It wasn't working. Coming to New York had been a mistake. If he'd moved to Seattle, they wouldn't think about him days on end. They could get on with their lives. They wouldn't have to pretend they understood, when they couldn't. When they didn't.

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When he returned to his apartment, tired and irritable, he decided to call Liz. He would tell her he'd forgotten he had a ticket to a concert on Sunday.

He held the phone a moment, then put it down without dialing.

September had golden days. He explored areas he had not seen, the Cloisters, SoHo, the United Nations, the Village. He had not imagined the city could remind him of his small town when he was a boy, but the haze of September afternoons in the Cloisters or the Park or even in the Village was like the still warm air he recalled when it was filled with the smoke of bonfires. That the haze was smog, exhaust fumes, and dust did not matter. The warm sun, diffused and golden, was familiar. He realized, when he walked in the Park, that his grandson had never known the joy of jumping in piles of leaves or their dusky sweet smoke when they were burned. Laws against pollution had banned that joy, something else forever gone.

He made a list of all the museums in the city. Making the list made him feel a bit silly, as though he were an eccentric old man, but he wanted to be sure he got to know them all. He listed the addresses of those he did not know and the nature of their collections. He was careful to watch in the *Times* for special events. He preferred the smaller museums where he could look at the entire collection without tiring—the Guggenheim, the Whitney, the Frick, or the special exhibits in the Morgan or Public libraries. In the larger museums he chose a floor or a section to see on each visit. He liked to eat lunch in the museums. There were always other people who were alone, and the rooms were oases where exhausted people lingered over their meals. He could hear conversations without seeming to eavesdrop. He found other people were often as baffled as he by what seemed outrageous jokes modern artists played—three ropes nailed to a wall, four cement blocks, three white and one black, arranged on a floor. Or he listened with interest to someone trying to explain an enthusiasm neither he, nor the speaker's companion, understood.

He met Liz for lunch at the Modern. It was the end of September. There was a touch of fall in the air, and she arrived in a suit, wearing gloves and carrying packages. Harald was amazed to see his daughter as one of those young suburban matrons who shopped and had lunch in the city. She was full of talk and

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interested in studying the Museum crowd. She had never had lunch at the MoMA, she said.

Harald was delighted. He hadn't felt as cheered in a long time, meeting his beautiful daughter in a place he liked, neutral ground they both found interesting. Just two people—an old man squiring a handsome young woman (What were people thinking, he wondered)—talking about things that interested them. No snags. No pity. It prompted him to make a confession which he knew would make him look silly. She doubted that, but she was eager to hear. Since he had gotten rid of all the pictures they had in Cleveland and his walls were bare, he had found a place in the Village where he was able to buy rope. He had bought three strands of rope (unfortunately they were not thick enough, but it was the best he could do) and nailed them to his wall. He wanted to see if, eventually, they became something other than three ropes nailed to a wall. He knew it sounded silly, but he thought people didn't give these constructions, or whatever they were called, enough time.

She had looked at him with increasing astonishment or increasing despair. A daughter's look, exasperated, burdened.

"You got rid of all the pictures!" Liz said. "How could you *do* that? I liked some of those pictures. Why didn't you send them to me? You didn't even ask me!"

He was stricken. He was sorry. It was, he understood, a terrible mistake. He had just wanted to get rid of everything. He hadn't thought. He was desperately sorry.

"You didn't even ask!" Liz repeated. She was speaking too loudly. People glanced at her.

She lowered her voice, put both hands on the table, and leaned toward him. "Why did you *do* that? Why do you act so strange?"

There was no possible answer, but he forced himself to keep looking into his daughter's eyes.

"Maybe you didn't love Mother. I suppose that's something children can't know. But we thought you did."

Even as he heard those terrible words, Harald understood they had been rehearsed. They were words Liz had said to herself, or words she and Hal had said between them.

"Maybe you never loved Mother *or* us. I don't know. I can't understand it. But you put her out of your mind as quickly as you

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could. Yes. You *did* get rid of everything. You got rid of every memory of Mother, and now you're trying to get rid of us."

"Liz," he said.

"Why was it necessary to get rid of everything? If there's an explanation, I'd like to hear it. It just seems to us you don't want to remember Mother, and you don't want to have anything to do with us." Her face was crumpling. She looked down and searched in her purse. She couldn't find a tissue or a handkerchief.

"Liz," he said again and offered her his handkerchief, which she ignored.

She blew her nose in her paper napkin. She was embarrassed. Even as she wiped her eyes, she glanced at the people sitting at the next table.

"Liz," he said. He tried to reach for her hand.

She was silent, looking down at her purse, and then said, almost whispering, "I don't know why it's true, but it *is* true. The minute Mother died you began thinking of no one but yourself."

"Oh, Liz," he said. "Let me explain. Let me try to explain."

She looked away and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean ever to say that." She dabbed her eyes with the napkin.

Their silence was caught in the center of the silence surrounding them. Liz stared at her lap. He stared at his hand lying palm upward on the table.

"Liz. You don't understand. You can't understand but let me try. I'm—" He stopped. There was no way he could avoid becoming a burden. If he entered their lives, he was a burden; if he tried to stay free, he was a burden. He looked at Liz, his lips pressed hard together.

Now, in the silence, low voices started at the tables around them.

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me," Liz said. "Please do forgive me. You don't have to explain." She put her paper napkin in her purse and picked up her packages. "I think I'd better go."

"Oh?" he said.

There were still tears in her eyes. "I think it's best." She stood up. While she put on her gloves, she looked directly at the people at the next table. They had not stopped watching, and she made them now look away. Then she leaned over, kissed her father on the forehead, and said, "I'll call."

He closed his eyes, which made him wipe them with his handkerchief. All his neighbors had watched Liz depart, and they

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now watched him. That would pass. If he were able to sit still, give himself enough time, he could leave quietly and unnoted, anonymous and alone.

The conversations started again. People finished their meals. Other people took their tables. He was able, finally, to rise and leave, everything having drained away, everything having steadied. He walked all the way from the Museum, through the Park, to his apartment. He was very tired, but he now knew the three strands of rope would never be anything but three strands of rope. He took them down, put them in a plastic bag, and put the bag out his back door onto the service landing.

He tried calling Liz but there was no answer. He stood for a long time at the front windows, looking down on the street.

He set himself the project, the next day, of trying to understand Egyptian art, or at least trying to understand why he had always disliked it. The two-dimensional rows of people, always in profile, always striding, seemed to him to celebrate a failure of mind and spirit, a tyranny, like the chanting of the high priests above Aïda's tomb. The almond-shaped eyes outlined in black and the receding foreheads did not portray people who had ever lived. People were of no importance except as symbols, useful as a frieze to decorate a tomb. An art celebrating only death, from tombs at Thebes, the mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut, tombs at Abydos, tombs at Deir el-Bahari, tombs everywhere.

He went to the Metropolitan Museum and spent the morning in the Egyptian section. He forced himself to look in minute detail, to compare one set of hieroglyphics with another, one symbol protruding from a forehead with another. He stared a long time at a fragment showing two profiled women. One's outspread hand had three fishes, or perhaps they were three eyes, above it. There was a man with the head of a fox. There was an eagle with a whip under its wing, and hieroglyphics and borders of birds and indecipherable pictures. He was distracted by suddenly discovering he was making the guard nervous. The man watched him with no attempt to disguise his suspicion. He went to the bookstore, bought a book on Egyptian art, and went to the cafeteria. While he ate he read that Mut, whose name contained the word for mother, could appear in the guise of a vulture. Rē was falcon-headed, but so were Rēhorakhty and Horus. Sekhmet was

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lion-headed. Nut could be a cow. He had seen no cows or vultures, and whether the birds he had seen were falcons he had no idea.

The telephone was ringing when he reached his apartment. Liz wanted to know where he had been. He explained that he was going to try to understand the differences between the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom, and the Middle and the New. She interrupted to tell him she wanted to apologize again. She had no idea what had come over her. She hoped he would forgive her.

Of course he would forgive her. It was for him to apologize in any case. He was very sorry about the pictures. He'd simply not thought about her or Hal's wanting them. It ended with his agreeing to go to Poughkeepsie the next Sunday.

"But no brunch with others," he said. "Just us? And Hal?"

She would try, she said, but she was doubtful. Sundays Hal played tennis. It was the only day he had for himself.

He spent the next day reading his book on Egyptian art. The book contained more history and architecture than descriptions of the art. Unless he made lists of which gods were represented by the ibis, crocodile, hippopotamus, bull, scorpion, snake, falcon, jackal, and cow, it did not seem he would discover much that would help him understand. He put the book aside.

The following day it rained hard, with a wind that drove the rain against his windows. He could find nothing he wanted to read. When the rain seemed to have lessened, he went out to get the *Times* and have an early lunch at the diner. The rain had not really lessened, so he returned to his apartment. He listened to Vivaldi, then decided he would write a letter to his brother. There was little to write about. His adventures in Manhattan had produced nothing which would interest his brother. He was startled to find, trying to imagine what he could write, that he had drifted off. He was staring into space and had written only three lines:

> Sorry I haven't written before. I am getting along just fine. I hope everything is well with you. My apartment is .

He went and stood at a window, looking down on 86th Street. The rain was slanted. Little waves of water were blown east along the street. The woman with her two-wheeled cart, bent even more than usual, pushed against the wind on the opposite sidewalk. She was the only person visible. A bus heaved itself westward, its

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vertical windshield wipers moving together and apart like two hands applauding the storm.

The only sounds he could hear were the rain and the occasional swish of tires. There were no sounds in the apartment. He could not remember, in Manhattan, being aware of such stillness. He would like to have heard a drawer being opened in the bedroom or a pan being moved on the stove. He would say, "Ruth, come look at that poor old woman, soaked in the rain. I wonder if she knows where she is or where her home is. Maybe she doesn't even have a home, though she doesn't look like a bag lady." But she was gone. He could no longer see her even though he pressed his face against the window.

He turned on the television just for the noise and sat down again to finish the letter.

> adequate. More than adequate, really. I was worried that after living in houses, an apartment would be noisy, but I have never heard a sound from any of the other apartments. The traffic bothered me at first, especially at night and especially the sirens. But I have been lucky.

A drop of water hit the word "lucky." He looked up to see if the ceiling were leaking and discovered his eyes were full of tears. The ceiling could not be leaking on the twelfth floor of a seventeen-floor building. He placed both his hands on the table and stared at the television. It was true. He was becoming a silly old man.

He sat very still. Any movement, it seemed, might make this moment permanent, might make what haunted him so real he would never again escape it. Only when he realized he had for a long time been watching people jump up and down, rush up on a stage, scream and clap their hands, did he dare move. He turned off the television, folded the piece of stationery, and dropped it in the wastebasket.

The next day the rain was gone, though the wind still blew from the west. Black clouds skimmed the top of the tall building with twin towers which he could see from his kitchen window. He ate breakfast at the diner, then took the bus to the Metropolitan.

He went to the Egyptian section. Rather than examine any of the works closely, he moved slowly through the rooms. He would try to get a sense of the collection, to see if he could see whatever subtle differences existed between the Old and the Middle King-

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doms and the more marked differences there supposedly were between the Middle and the New. Perhaps he would understand something of the art if he simply immersed himself in the whole.

The problem was that none of it was art. These fragments from the tombs were manuscripts which had been composed with figures and animals rather than letters. They were thus interesting, as medieval illuminated manuscripts might be interesting, but no one but an expert could say any more than "This is how the Egyptians, this is how one group of ancient people, communicated."

He wandered off, moving through the Museum without purpose or plan and found he had a strange, a very odd, reaction to all he saw. A room full of medieval paintings of the crucifixion did not seem to be art but messages from the past, manuscripts in which the first experiments with perspective were no different than the symbols sprouting from the foreheads of Egyptian gods. This was how a certain people, Western Europeans of the Middle Ages, communicated their sense of death, their longing for their God. These pictures were also messages, no less stylized, no less communal and anonymous, though certain works could be assigned to certain names.

With a growing sense of excitement, he moved through the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century displays. They were all the same, stylized messages from people who had not escaped their time. The usual effort in a museum—at least his usual effort—was to recognize the artist. But what difference was there if one picture were by David and another by Corot? One by Turner and another by Constable? They were all messages which people, ancient or current, sent forth from their own time. Kokoschka, O'Keeffe, Johns, three strands of rope, and four cement blocks: they were all communal and anonymous. They would all become messages sent from an ancient people who lived in the twentieth century.

He could scarcely sit still in the cafeteria and eat his lunch. He listened to a conversation about Rembrandt's use of light, and he wanted to interrupt and explain that centuries ago light became simply a sign, a signal from the seventeenth century to the future. It was not Rembrandt. It was anonymous and communal.

Was he being silly? Whom could he explain this to? Who would listen to his discovery, and who would understand?

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He left the Museum and stopped at the top of the steps. The storm had passed. The sky was a brilliant blue, the sun warm and golden, the air sparkling and cool. He stood for a moment at the top of the steps. People sat on the steps, moved up and down the steps, their voices lifted by the sunlight and the sudden clean air. The colors were washed and shining. Taxis gleamed yellow in the sun.

He had planned to go home, but he turned south and walked along the Park. Fifth Avenue hummed with traffic, glistened downtown, purged of pollution. He could see, far down the Avenue, sun sparkling off cars and taxis and buses. A river of faces, a river of heads flowed up the Avenue, down the Avenue, gold, black, eddies of brown, like waves dancing in the light: orange, green, blue, gray, red, black, white.

The twentieth century.

Pollock.

The city was, again, vast and inviting. He walked lightly down the Avenue, feeling, more mysteriously than ever, that he was a part of all the glorious, anonymous activity of Manhattan.

"Ruth, Ruth," he said to himself, "this is October's bright blue weather." This is the time they would have walked, holding hands, in New England's hills beneath the colored leaves. Instead of all this bustle, it would have been quiet, and they could have talked with each other. Ruth would have gathered the red and yellow and orange-brown leaves. She would have gathered long grasses, spindly weeds with fragile flowers, and odd-shaped twigs.

He could have explained his discovery to her. She would have been interested. She would have understood.

> Yes, I see what you mean. All those taxis, cars, buildings, people gleaming in the sun. These are the symbols of our gods. These are our signals to those to come.
>
> Communal and anonymous.

He hailed a taxi. He did not want to go back to his apartment on such a golden day, but he did want to rescue, if at all possible, the plastic bag with the three strands of rope. Then he would call Liz and Hal and tell them—something. He didn't know what it was, but he would think of it when he heard their voices. It was all right that they didn't know how to comfort him. He was comforted, by memories and the world. Everything was going to be all right. They didn't need to worry.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Chiaroscuro

Rain writes across the windowpane.
Wind-driven, it attenuates
its burden to oblivion,
then reappears to write again.

The gesture of your hand must be
your hand, for if a hand were mute,
unfit to utter touch, or empty
out, it would not be your hand.

And yet the gesture passes, while
your hand remains. Likewise, your smile
is just an adjective of soul,
for smiles failed altogether, once.

The tear, which fell or did not fall,
the gesture that your hand betrayed,
are clear enough in memory
though we obscure the things they said.

For those whose very bodies mean
must change substantially in time,
and fail to tend the story-line,
unlike the inadvertent rain.

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Rondo, Andante

The elements of light
that take the warm interior of my house
this autumn evening may be just the same
as those outside that hang,
fading and brilliant, on the ecstatic branch.
Only the careful patterns of interference
that order them in air are various.
Crisscross bayberry lattice, rhododendron
starred, right angles on the oak,
the tumbled arches of forsythia,
piano music, Mozart simplified
so children may repeat him, and their mother
who never played at all until this year.
Minor chords to fasten the filtered light
my great aunt Emily worked a century past
onto her needlepoint. Relationship
makes elements complex,
therefore estranging them from what they were
as elements: so out of red and gold
a maple leaf arises, or a woman
who notices how music has changed her hands.

And therefore harmonizing: on the stairs,
the children sit together, quiet for once,
blond head, black curls in whispered consultation
over a fleet of glossy miniature cars
whose wheels will briefly track
the wooden floorboards and then disappear.
And on the table, alstroemeria
that lasts a week if anyone remembers
to change the water, statice, and yellow freesia,
and eucalyptus thrown in by the florist
for once for free, and indestructible fern.
Even the furniture repeats the patterns,
each piece inhabited by a watchful spirit:
my luminous aunt, who tips the gooseneck rocker
that taps the edge of the 1940 Hymnal,

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who might have rocked the ultimate foundations
of the whole Episcopal church, if she'd survived;
my grandmother, tilting the portraits out of plumb,
who drove an hour in the teeth of a hurricane
though she was nearly blind
to ransom them from my Grimm stepmother's house;

My mother, absently humming,
who every evening matches up the bookends
that picture Chao Meng Fu's quite literal
landscapes, each blue tree exemplifying
the character for "tree," and each green hill
the character for "hill." She once shellacked
their ivoried surfaces in endless tedious
sessions of *découpage* (her last distraction
before the Master's and the botched divorce);
the quiet house occasionally filled
with Mozart, the inconsolable light of sunset
streaming through locked windows.
And I'd stand all alone at the front door
watching the maples flicker against the horizon,
listening for train whistles, for the sound
of diesel trucks roaring down Route 30,
quite unaware the westward place I longed for
was only my own house,
its parts permuted and understood otherwise,
the way a mother begins to study Mozart,
a child's hand riding lightly upon her hand.

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How the Last Tomb Was Opened

The heat, the dust, the flies,
the sheer improbability
of finding anything at all. Cobras
flaring suddenly at careless workmen,
furious to be roused from sleep
that settles with the stones, millennia.

Then Carnarvon deciding to give up,
relenting, coming through for one more season.
They'd scoured the Valley of the Kings,
turned up only a gravedigger's joke:
a mummified pet cat,
grave-seals bearing Tutankhamen's name.

But something held him. A dark room,
a door, steps down, a memory
of incidentals older than his own
brief history. So when the day occurred,
he walked into the anteroom
as if at home, though not of course himself.

Over months that lasted into years,
he named the golden objects one by one
as if they were familiar,
though he soon enough estranged them
using wax, photography, and measure,
shipping them to Cairo.

Perhaps it was the way the chambers smelled,
mildewed linen, cedar, papyrus leaf,
a thread of human perfume
that couldn't be. It all came back to him
until they broached the wall
that sealed the royal tomb.

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Years afterwards, Carter recalled the silence
of those assembled over the young king.
So much labor to remove
the shrines, the stone sarcophagus,
three coffins (and the last of solid gold),
the necklaces, charms, plaquettes, rings.

Yet when the gorgeous coffin was secured,
opened, the wrappings wound away,
instead they found a boy
no greater than his brown, diminished body,
for all the world, for all the gold and prayers,
for all the haunting intimations, dead.

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JOHN HOLLOWAY

Lighten Our Darkness

Hallowe'en Jack deserves his name,
glaring across the autumn dark;
a carved-up pumpkin, a candle-flame
that's all—but he's the vital spark;
a moon in the great starry night,
lights the whole valley with his mark:
a facelike lantern, sunlike bright.

Jack sends his message plain: he paints
a lesson for us as he sprawls
with grinning face: revere the saints
some say; but I believe he calls
a wilder music out from space
blazing against the forest walls
the sunrise of his lantern face.

The end of night; and in the east
the spread at first of grey, then white,
that needs no scripture and no priest
nor even Jack, as acolyte,
but floods its gleaming, golden way
from Jack the Sun: his dazzling light
climbs up and brings the blaze of day.

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DAVID LITTLEJOHN

What's So Great about Vermeer?

Reflections on the Washington Exhibition

By closing day, the 1995–96 Vermeer show in Washington had clocked in 327,551 visitors. This may sound impressive, but it was less than one-third the number of patrons of the all-time top American museum exhibitions—Rodin in 1981 and "The Treasure Houses of Britain" in 1985, also held at the National Gallery in Washington; and the big Monet show held last year in Chicago.

But then Vermeer was twice interrupted—once when posturing politicians managed to shut down the whole federal government, of which the National Gallery is a part; then by what we are told was the East Coast's worst blizzard in more than 70 years. Together, these cut 20 days out of the show's scheduled 90-day run, leaving it with far shorter innings than Monet or the Treasure Houses.

And then the museum limited the daily intake to just 4,000 people, in peristaltic clumps of 250 every half hour, all—or all but congressmen, diplomats, journalists, museum people, big donors, and other people with connections—of whom had to wait in line each day to pick up their priceless free tickets. The increased publicity created by the shutdowns, as well as the growing legend spread both by the media ("the Show of the Century," PBS called it) and by lucky people who had already got in, gradually turned Vermeer into the art show of a lifetime, the one exhibition every art fan who could possibly get to Washington was determined to see.

It was relatively easy to see in mid-November, when it first opened. By late January, people were queuing up by the thousands, around all four sides of the sprawling pile of the old National Gallery. On sub-freezing, snow-bordered sidewalks they waited, wrapped in parkas, in sleeping bags, in Mylar skirts, hoping for one of the 2,500 same-day tickets that were handed out beginning at 10:00 A.M. On February 11, before the show's closing day, people camped out in tents for up to 14 hours,

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playing chess by candlelight and buying T-shirts that read "I Survived the Vermeer Line."

I was, I must admit, one of those "people with connections." By pretending to be an art critic, I was allowed to wheel in an hour before the patient public, straight from my overnight flight from California. I *knew* that the early paintings in the first room were of little importance, so I zapped past the Mexican ambassador's entourage. In the second gallery I caught glimpses of Vermeer's two perfect outdoor paintings, *The Little Street* and *The View of Delft*, each with a whole wall to itself. But they were surrounded by clusters of rich museum ladies, who were being lectured to by droning docents. I'll come back, I thought. I wanted a gallery all to myself.

I got one. Gallery Three (out of four). Four big walls, five little paintings. Five quiet women in thick museum frames. All mine, for about half an hour, until the rich ladies and the Mexican diplomats caught up with me: the so-called *Music Lesson*, from Buckingham Palace; the National Gallery's own *Woman with a Balance*; the *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, from Amsterdam; the Metropolitan's *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*—the first painting I ever loved, the first print I ever bought; and the *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* from Berlin, wearing the same short yellow satin jacket trimmed in ermine as her sister from Washington. Just around a corner was another woman—possibly the same woman, possibly the painter's wife—wearing the same jacket, the National Gallery's *Woman Writing*.

Actually, it's sort of fun tracking down Vermeer's limited assortment of settings and props. That same yellow jacket—"a yellow satin mantle with white fur trimmings," it's called in a 1676 inventory of his widow's possessions—also shows up in three other paintings, none of which made it to Washington. With, for the first and last time in my life, so many Vermeers to compare in one place—20 out of the 35 we have left, according to most experts—I kept saying to myself, "I've seen that room before." Or that curtain, that carpet, that map, that globe, that face.

I stayed till four in the afternoon, one hour more or less on my own, five hours as part of the most genial, responsive, well-behaved wall-to-wall mob I've ever been in. So I had time to go back and check out the repeated rooms, accessories, and faces. I ended up sketching the patterns of his Oriental rugs and leaded

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windows, just to verify that those were the *same* windows and carpets I had seen in Painting 9 or 17. This, fortuitously, led people to assume I was some sort of expert, so they backed around me to leave clear my line of sight.

Why did these repetitions seem to matter? Mainly, I suppose, because we know so little about Johannes Vermeer; less than we know about Shakespeare. A Yale economist has doggedly tracked down 429 documents that mentioned either Vermeer's name or that of one of his relatives, for a book called *Vermeer and His Milieu.* He ends up telling us a lot about his relatives and his milieu, but very little, for sure, about Vermeer.

We don't know whom he studied with. We don't know what other artists he knew. (Art historians, of course, speculate all over the map.) We don't know that he ever left the environs of Delft before he was forty, although people presume he got at least as far as Amsterdam and Utrecht, all of 50 or 60 miles away. Wilder scholars imagine him somehow getting to Italy. We have no idea what he thought about art, music, politics, women, or religion, although learned dissertations have been written about his opinions on all of these topics.

Johannes, son of Reynier, was born in 1632; married in 1653; and died in 1675, at forty-three. His father only adopted the name "Vermeer" when Johannes—who never used the name "Jan," by the way—was nearly eight. His wife bore him 15 children in 20 years, which may help explain why several of his paintings are of apparently pregnant women. Eleven of the children outlived their father. In her petition for support a year after his death, Catharina Bolnes Vermeer wrote that her late husband "during the long and ruinous war with France [the French had invaded Holland in 1672] not only had been unable to sell any of his art but also, to his great detriment, was left sitting with the paintings of other masters that he was dealing in. As a result and owing to the very great burden of his children, having no means of his own, he had lapsed into such decay and decadence, which he had so taken to heart that, as if he had fallen into a frenzy, in a day or day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead."

If we add to the surviving paintings now attributed to Vermeer the dozen or so more that were called his in seventeenth-century sales or inventories, we get a productivity rate of just over two paintings a year. Whether he actually spent six months on each

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painting, or what he did when he wasn't painting (he was apparently an art dealer on a small scale), we have almost no idea. One could say that, with eleven children and a feisty mother-in-law in the house, it's a wonder he got any painting done at all, let alone painting that evokes such preternatural calm.

So I found myself fascinated each time I came back to what felt like the same corner of the same room—with the same window, the same little mirror, the same yellow drape. Standing in front of the famous sunwashed corner, I felt I was standing precisely where Vermeer must often have stood, in a room in his own house (most likely his mother-in-law's house) in the Catholic quarter of Delft. Serious scholars study the black-and-white marble floor tiles that appear in so many of his paintings in order to analyze his ever-refined approach to perspective. I study the floors to see if I'm in the same room I was in three paintings ago, with the same vertical edging of blue and white Delft tiles.

You can find the same upholstered chairs, with the same gleaming nailheads (made of dots of white paint), the same carved wooden lion-head finials, in eleven different paintings. The Paris *Astronomer* (which the Louvre wouldn't lend) and the Frankfurt *Geographer* are obviously the same man, in the same room, at the same table, in front of the same windows, with the same cabinet and world globe. Same size canvas, too. Vermeer used a big viola da gamba as a prop in three different paintings. Some scholars assume he borrowed the elegant, expensive keyboard instruments that appear in four of his paintings; others think his well-off mother-in-law may have owned at least one. The two virginals from London's National Gallery are obviously identical, although he altered the landscape painting on the lid. Those great maps he collected, which enrich and compose his back walls, depict different parts of Holland or Europe, as far as I can tell. But the black iron pole that holds the maps flat at the bottom is used over and over as a horizontal accent.

I want to *know* this man, and the only substantial clues he has left behind lie in these paintings.

Why do I want to know him? Because I think he's the greatest painter who ever lived.

I first heard of Vermeer in Art 2A—a class called "Elements of Form"—which I was obliged to take as an architecture major

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during my first semester at Berkeley, in fall 1954. The instructor was a mild-mannered artist from San Francisco named Fred Reichman. As we struggled over our crude charcoal drawings in a now-demolished wooden building, he tacked up Vermeer and Cézanne prints on the walls in the hope of overcoming our cloddish resistance to anything more profound than Norman Rockwell.

In my case it worked. I wrote a paper for him analyzing "the light from Vermeer's windows." On my first trip to New York the next summer, at eighteen, I made a point of seeing all seven Vermeers at the Metropolitan and the Frick. I fell in love with the Met's *Lady with the Water Pitcher*, and bought a print of her, which I enshrined in an antique oak frame I found in a junk shop in Oakland and sawed down to fit her.

In 1966, my wife and I and our year-old daughter spent a year in France, where I had got a Fulbright to the University of Montpellier. In September, just before we were to start teaching, the commission in charge assembled us all in Paris, to lecture us on how to get along with the French. Between lectures, I happened upon an exhibition at the Orangerie museum in the Tuileries called "Dans la lumière de Vermeer: cinq siècles de peinture." *Twelve* Vermeer paintings—more than would ever be gathered together again in one place, André Malraux assured us in the catalogue—were surrounded by masterpieces before and after him that somehow lived "in his light"—works by Van Eyck, Giorgione, Zurbarán, de la Tour, de Hooch, Canaletto, Chardin, Corot, Degas, Cézanne.

Eight of the Vermeers I met at the Orangerie, as it happened, I encountered again at the National Gallery last January. In addition, M. Malraux got the monumental *Maidservant Pouring Milk* from Amsterdam (although it didn't go to Washington, it was in The Hague version of the show, which ran from March through May 1996); the strange little *Head of a Girl* now at the Metropolitan, then still in a private American collection; Baron de Rothschild's *Astronomer*, now at the Louvre; and Vermeer's autobiographical testament, *The Art of Painting* from Vienna, which we are now told is too fragile to travel.

I boasted of my good fortune in a letter to the man who got me my first job at Berkeley. Back he wrote, "I should like to have shared the Vermeer show. Once, to have a thread in an otherwise

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aimless two months, I saw all the Vermeers to be seen outside of Petrograd." I checked that out, and sure enough, the Russians had seized two Vermeers from Dresden in 1945 and spirited them away to Leningrad—which of course hadn't been called "Petrograd" since 1918, but perhaps he was making some wry political point. They didn't return them until 1956. Neither one of them made it to Washington; perhaps Dresden was afraid that America would keep them for another eleven years.

In any case, I determined then and there to better Ben Lehman's record, with the fantasy of one day writing a book which I would call, of course, "All the Vermeers Outside of Petrograd." As of last January, I had seen 28, including the one stolen from the Gardner Museum in Boston in 1990 and never recovered. The Washington show has now spared me having to get to Brunswick and Frankfurt, but to finish the job properly I'll still have to go to Dresden and Berlin. More importantly, it allowed me—and 327,550 others—to see so many of Vermeer's paintings in one place at one time that we might begin to figure out *why* he may be the greatest painter in Western history.

Let me go back to those five women in Gallery 3, along with the Washington *Woman Writing* around the corner—to my mind, the heart and soul of the exhibition.

Critics make a to-do about the woman and the man in the Queen's painting (originally bought for George III in 1762). What *is* their relationship, scholars wonder—*is* he just her music teacher? Is she sneaking a peek at him? (Her face in the mirror, which doesn't quite match the back of her head, is looking in his direction.) Why did Vermeer leave two legs of his easel reflected in that mirror? What is *symbolized* by the viol on the floor, they want to know; by the white pitcher; by the painting on the wall—which I can't even make out?

As with all of Vermeer's best paintings, I find "story" and symbol questions irrelevant. I see this room, in fact, *without* people. They intrude like ghosts into its perfection. The woman is there for her red skirt and columnar presence; the man is there to balance her. Vermeer was a painter, a composer of shapes and colors; not a storyteller. Never a storyteller. What matters more than the two vague human figures are the perfectly drawn leading in the windows and the decorations on the spinet, the living veins

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in the marble floor. The eye cannot help but be pulled in, by way of the cage of black-and-white diagonals, to the pure painted light on that exquisite wall, which mellows to the right as it passes the shadows of the ledge, the virginal's legs, the tilted mirror; and finally leads the eye to rest on the round white vase, resting on its salver atop the great pyramidal spill of fringed Turkey carpet.

Paintings like this, with their satisfying equipoise of verticals, horizontals, and diagonals—the four box shapes of that dead-on instrument with the mirror's rectangle growing out of it, so clearly "aimed at" by the receding tiles and wall of windows, then echoed in the ceiling beams—make me wish that someone would try to analyze and help to explain the impact of Vermeer's geometrical compositions, as Erle Loran did for Cézanne's, more than 50 years ago.

Reproductions and slides convey very little of the real presence of Vermeer's sublimely self-possessed, solitary women. They all share the same kind of glowing, tangible light—a kind of "divine light"—from casement windows at the left, the poignant idealism of smooth, simple, egg-oval faces—nunlike faces, sometimes, the hair hidden in white coifs; the standard accessories I've mentioned, the maps and chairs and carpets. Each is a miraculous union of compositional finesse and deep human pathos, *without* the need for spiritual or allegorical or even narrative significance. Of course there are wise art historians ready to explain to us what the scales mean, and what the pearls mean, and what the pitcher means, and the iconographical history of pink hair ribbons. Almost everybody comes up with the idea that the pregnant lady in blue has just read some bad news from her husband, away at war somewhere on the map, and is trying not to cry. Which is fine with me: I did it too, when I first saw her in Amsterdam.

But in the end I found myself beginning to wonder if it wasn't the simple, intensely refined geometrical compositions that *created*, or at least created a home for, the tenderness and pathos we irresistibly feel. If I now find the *Woman with a Water Pitcher* the least moving—although the most luminous, most controlled—of the five, it may have something to do with the apparent pregnancy of the others, their combination of maternal repose and extra-careful delicacy, as they finger and direct their attention to fine and fragile things: a single folded sheet of paper; a pair of scales so fine it's almost invisible; the ribbon ends of a pearl necklace

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created by tiny dots of white paint; a quill pen—and, over her shoulder, us.

Anyone—at least any man—who has read Edward Snow's highly personal and poetic *Study of Vermeer* is unlikely to be able to meet the gaze of *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* without feeling something of the confusion and complicity he so eloquently describes.

"To meet this young girl's gaze is to be implicated in its urgency," Snow writes. "It is *me* at whom she gazes, with real, unguarded human emotions, and with an intensity that demands something just as real and human in return. . . . one grows complicit with the painting's own impossible desires."

He describes the girl's gaze as a stew of unresolved contradictions, which only leaves the captivated (male?) viewer all the more guilty and confused. The parted lips are sensual, acquiescent, inviting, he insists; but their impression is countered by the eyes, which look apprehensive and afraid. Surprise, bewilderment, yearning, acceptance, understanding—in sequence, or all at once—her glance seems to convey all of these, full both of grief (that pearl that is a tear) and desire. "Her eyes sharpen the underlying mood into something poignant and piercing," Snow writes, "and focus it on the artist/viewer with a mixture of reproach and regret. . . . The act of looking is haunted here by suggestions of violation and betrayal, and by a certain attendant guilt. . . . suddenly the most personal responses, drawn from the most private, well-protected regions of the self, are required."

"The result is to make us only that much more self-conscious of our solitary presence outside the frame, concentrated in an exchange of emotional energy with an image that looks back at us from the other side of an emotional divide. . . . Is it our life that makes her real," he asks, "is it her vibrancy of being . . . that we lack, and long for?"

My responses to this and other Vermeer paintings were rarely as personal and passionate as Snow's. To his private testimony regarding *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* I would only add that a great deal of whatever impact it has on the viewer seems to me to derive from very specific, very visible painterly techniques. (It's been recently cleaned.) The light colored spots that appear to round her lower lip; the shift from light paint to darker that forms

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the ridge below her nose; the painter's decision to "lose" the left side of her nose in her cheek; the dots of white on her pupils that make her eyeballs seem to bulge; the similar splot of white that englobes the pendant earring; the softly blurred, overpainted outline of her face—as if it were something one could finger and feel—against the flat, pitch-black ground—a background he never used again; the brusque, Cézanne-like rounding of her turban by shifting from blue strokes to black—all of these are vivid as fingerprints, evidence of Vermeer's presence, of his attempts (as Snow put it) to nurse this face into being. And now we move into his place, and take over his role, returning her stare.

Today, the entire painted surface of this work is spiderwebbed with a fine network of cracks—what art critics call *cracquelure*—which only makes the ability of this imaginary girl to reach out and disturb us from her paint-created, 330-year-old flatness all the more astonishing.

Three other solitary women were crowded into one corner of Gallery 4, where Vermeer pilgrims tried to squeeze between each other's necks and shoulders to catch a peek, like rock fans at a stadium concert straining to get a glimpse of the star. What's most surprising about these paintings is their size. They're all smaller than a sheet of typing paper; only slightly larger than jumbo postcards. Most illustrations of them totally belie the tiny size of the originals. The endearing, intensely focused Paris *Lacemaker*, whose red and white threads are nothing but thin spills of paint, is 9 inches by 8 inches; the *Girl with the Red Hat*, a popular, erotically inviting work in Washington, is 9 by 7; *The Girl with a Flute*—also at Washington—is just 8 by 7. If Vermeer did an average of two paintings a year, he certainly had plenty of time to kill between these—*if* he did them. Experts aren't sure about the last two.

The main reason the National Gallery limited visitor numbers, in fact, is that there were so few paintings to be seen, and that most of them are so small. Many of the works that move us deeply exist in an imaginary box about the size of a television screen. Nineteen of his surviving paintings—including 14 of what I would consider the 20 best—would fit within an 18″ × 21″ frame. You have to stand close to examine them—three or four feet away seems about right, unless you want to move in and look at the brushstrokes, the surface-crackling, the play of museum lights

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across still sticky-looking paint. Standing near to these intimate, in-drawing perspective boxes, you're drawn irresistibly into the idealized world of the painting, *as if* into the inner world of the idealized subject (almost always female, almost always beautiful), *as if* into the inner world of the artist: the man I am trying to get to know.

Almost always female; almost always beautiful. I suppose I'm spoiled by the egg-like heads, the soft Raphael-contoured faces, the heavy eyelids or gleaming eyeballs, the moist parted lips of Vermeer's "perfect" women—like domesticated, this-worldly, vaguely sensual Madonnas. But I find myself shuddering at his odd-looking women, as if they were painted on purpose to disorient and trouble me: that swooning, overweight Allegory clutching her bosom, while she perches her right foot on a world globe, to keep it from rolling down with the bleeding snake and bitten apple; that drunken, loopy-looking girl in the billowing orange dress from Brunswick, offering us her dumb, cockeyed grin.

There are only five men in the works on display, if you discount those tiny figures standing across the harbor from Delft. Of the two cavaliers in the Brunswick wine drinking scene, one is lost in a tobacco stupor, the other smarmily trying to get that silly woman drunk. The music teacher, if that's what he is, in the Queen's *Music Lesson* scarcely exists except to fill up space, and give the standing woman something to glance sideways at in the mirror. Christ in the house of Martha and Mary—one of his earliest works—is much feebler than either Martha or Mary. Only the pensive *Geographer* is made to seem noble and alert, in a beautifully composed and painted work that seems (like its pendant *Astronomer*) to be Vermeer's formalized tribute to the intense intellectual curiosity of the seventeenth-century Dutch Age of Discovery: a kind of humanized allegory, a visible incarnation of thought—which may offer a hint of the sort of fellow-citizens Vermeer most admired. But despite a few exceptions, Vermeer obviously cared more about women than he did about men.

The only children he ever seems to have painted are the two kids playing under the bench in *The Little Street*, their rear ends daubed in with a few brownish strokes. As John Montias writes, "Here is a man living in daily contact with a brood of children—their cradles, beds, and chairs, according to the inventory taken

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after his death, were strewn all over the house—who chooses never to paint one of them, at least in any picture . . . that we know of." Perhaps, Montias suggests—and I'll buy this—Vermeer took refuge in painting from the "turbulence of his daily life."

What most impressed me about *The Little Street* this time around, seeing it in the context of all these flawlessly realized interiors, was how suddenly Vermeer had managed to learn—at the age of twenty-five or so—to do equal justice to an open-air subject. He's as fantastic at exteriors as he is at interiors; I can think of no other painter who did both equally well. Those bricks seem to think, to carry each its separate brickish history. At first glance, the little 21 × 17-inch painting creates the illusion of meticulous, microscopic hyperrealism, as if each different old brick—cracked bricks, dirty bricks, gray bricks—was painted separately, lovingly. But they weren't. What you have is a knowing shorthand for brick, speckling different bits of paint here and there with a tiny brush, intermingling the reds with dark metal braces and thin lines of white to suggest rotting mortar and grouted cracks. He dashes in spots of white against black, knowing we will read it as a woman sitting sewing in her doorway; another few strokes create a housemaid, bending over some chore in a passageway; a few squiggled brown lines, and there's the street. The time-stained whitewash on the first floor is evoked by "dirtied" white paint, which is almost the same thing.

But I think the secret of this little painting is its composition, even more than its brushwork and color: the "accidental," off-center cropping; the play of crossed diagonals in the houses behind; the perfect rhythm set up by three doorways, the first arched and closed, the second drawing us into a short passageway in strangely steep perspective—a tiny framed painting in itself; the third open to a darkened interior. The abstract, Hans Hofmann-like play of the red shutter on the right of the open door against the two green shutters on the left forces the artist to throw the whole house front out of symmetry, just because he wanted that red rectangle, there. The worn, unremarkable working-class setting is neither idealized nor pathetic. It's just there, as if seen from the painter's window—a quiet Dutch domestic moment caught for all time, apparently better than real because it's so clearly made of paint.

Like many viewers, I found myself returning several times to the

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large *View of Delft*—which is many people's favorite painting by Vermeer (including Marcel Proust's: "the most beautiful painting in the world," he once called it). *I* kept returning in an effort to discover how he was able to turn the skyline of an ordinary seventeenth-century town of 25,000 into such an enchanted place. I see those little daubed-in people at the left end of the wide foreground strand as our go-betweens, our surrogates. They appear oblivious to the romantic city behind them, but I like to imagine them (and us) about to board the black and red boat and cross the harbor to Vermeer's timeless, tangible, magical town, where the arch through that bridge at right center, and the sunlit, rose-colored roofs behind it, draw us into the city.

Other seventeenth-century views and maps of Delft make it clear that Vermeer moved buildings about, extended their shadows, and shrank the foreground people in order to achieve the composition he wanted. The placing of the water gates and church towers is profoundly satisfying, as is that central inlet with the sunwashed buildings behind. His various painterly forms of shorthand for brick, stone, and tile work wonderfully well: he apparently sprinkled sand in his white lead underlayer to give more texture to the red tile roofs on the left.

But the element here that matters most is light. It begins with those dark, threatening Channel clouds that fill the whole top of the picture, with lighter clouds below and behind them. In a minute, the clouds will have moved, the light will have changed. But the dreamlike spots of light in the jewel-like, model city—made to seem all the more precious and fragile, because the sky above takes up so much of the canvas—are the result of sunlight's making its way, at one fleeting instant, through the spaces between those lowering clouds. This accounts for the sparkles on the tile roofs, the flickering chimneys and spires, the inviting salmon- or rose-colored roofs in the center, the fairy-like tower of the New Church Vermeer created out of thick ivory streaks; the "*petit pan de mur jaune*," the little patch of yellow wall to the right Proust's Bergotte rose from his deathbed to see—and then died right there in the museum—the Jeu de Paume, in fact, just opposite the Orangerie, where the picture was displayed in 1921. Bergotte suddenly realized that all his collected works weren't worth that one square inch of paint. What I found particularly pleasing, as I let my eyes travel over the freshly-cleaned painting,

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was the almost mystical union the painter achieved among earth, sky, and water. From the great billowing clouds, sunlight reaches to set parts of the city alight, then casts dark reflections of its buildings into the harbor.

What most made the city live for me, once again, was the obvious evidence of the painter's hand and brush. For all its apparent finesse, Vermeer's *View of Delft* has nothing of the flat, lifeless exactness of a cityscape by Bellotto, or one of those ultra-precise Dutch still lifes or church interiors, which hide any trace of a brush or human hand. Some bits he chooses to do with great care; others he dots or dashes rapidly in. The broad curve of the foreground is painted in wide, diagonal ochre strokes. The river and its reflections are made up of short horizontal dashes not that far from Monet. One can feel a fine brush tip laying in the prickly spires and finials. Tiny *pointilliste* spots of white add a sparkle to rooftops, to the cream-colored church tower, and to that black boat moored across the water. Looked at up close and from an angle—virtually the only way one could see it in Washington—the low-relief ridges and layers of paint ripple as one moves past the painting. The crowds made it difficult to back up to the proper distance—about six feet, I would guess—to see the *View of Delft* at its best. But one of the reasons the city lives with such uncanny vitality is that we feel that Vermeer lifted his hand off the canvas only minutes ago.

I did go back to check out, briefly, the three early works in the opening rotunda. The first, which Arthur Wheelock, the prime mover of this exhibition, only declared a Vermeer ten years ago, is a nearly-exact copy of a painting by a minor Florentine artist, bearing the date 1655. (As soon as Wheelock went public with his attribution—which, I should note, has been rejected by the leading Dutch Vermeer expert—the painting was bought by the heiress to the Johnson & Johnson fortune.) This is *St. Praxedis*, whose thing was to sponge up and save the blood of early Christian martyrs, like the beheaded character stretched out behind her. It apparently bears a signature like Vermeer's, and makes use of the same pigments he used. If it *is* by Vermeer, I'm glad he quickly moved on to other subjects.

In *Diana and Her Companions*, from The Hague, it seems as if Vermeer was still "finding himself," still working over the received classical and biblical themes, while struggling to de-spiritualize

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and de-theatricalize them, in order to paint something closer to his own world. There is something of his later tenderness towards women in the soft-edged contours of their faces, a few hints of his later mastery of light and color. But Italians did this sort of subject so much better.

With *Christ at the House of Martha and Mary*, he's getting closer, I think. The best thing in it is Martha, the hard-working sister: the light-planes of her face, the eyelid and nose; her stooping, working-woman's posture—the painting of her headdress, her vest, the light on her pushed-up white sleeves. But compare that dead basket of bread in it with the timeless, light-flecked basket and bread in the *Maidservant Pouring Milk*; the cloth and the carpet with any of his later cloths or carpets; the awkward color combinations with the impeccable harmonic finesse of those great solitary women of the 1660s.

Most people presume that the rear view of the artist, in the allegorical work popularly called *The Art of Painting*, was intended by Vermeer as a self-portrait. I suppose one could paint one's backside with the aid of a pair of mirrors, though the artist's fancy black-and-white costume has always struck me as the wrong kind of clothes to wear to paint in. By extension, people go on to presume that the laughing fellow on the left in the Dresden *Procuress*, holding a glass of wine and a guitar, is another self-portrait of Johannes Vermeer—aged about twenty-four—partly because he's wearing the same old-fashioned costume.

Neither of these self-images, if that's what they are, was in the Washington show. But there was more than enough there to let me believe I'd got to know the painter a little bit better.

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DENNIS SAMPSON

Reverence for Life

Polished on Saturday evening till they glimmered
beside the sofa for all of us
to see, my father's shoes
seemed mystical to me,

and after everyone had gone
to bed I'd pick one up
and breathe the deep aroma
of leather buffed and glowing

then stare inside the mouth
smelling of Dr. Scholl's
as if the secret of my father's being
would be revealed. Kicked off

at dusk they'd hit the linoleum
with a thump and lay apart
baring their grey soles,
finding their way back to stand

like bride and groom in the closet,
the tennis shoes and boots,
the wing tips accumulating dust
waiting for the day

when they'd be taken out
and given one more chance,
so much riding on their willingness
to fit and be beautiful!

Peering from underneath
the coverlet, trailing their laces
unravelled with a single
flick, or propped up

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on the coffee table after supper,
they seemed so human,
encouraging one another to endure.
And when my father drew

me off to his room to offer
for display the shoes
he wanted me to choose from,
each obediently silent and in

formation, I understood too well
what they had been through
and where their allegiance lay,
backing away from this family

I adored for never once complaining
and that I at first refused
to separate. In pain
I picked, at his insistence,

the pair he hadn't worn in years,
putting them up on my desk
to look at for the longest time
as if the mystery of this man

I knew so little of and who
walked everywhere and never
threw a single shoe away
would suddenly come clear,

then crept back up the stairs
and slid them into place
beside the others
in this improbable cathedral

of shirts and suits
scented with cologne, with a gentleness
I would come to understand
as reverence for the only life I had.

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FLOYD SKLOOT

Glinka Dancing

My feet were all right, but I couldn't
manage the castanets.
—Mikhail Glinka, 1845

In the olive and wine-scented
light of a Seville summer night,
the Father of Russian Music
glowed garnet as he stomped
triple time through his first
Zapateado. This was better
than the stylized Seguidilla
he mastered in the smoky dark
of Madrid. It was closer to
his soul than the Fandango
with its hardwood and cord
castanets, or the Malaguena—
voluptuous as that gypsy woman
by the bar all draped in hemp
and jute, smiling at him now
in the mirror. What he loved
was the solo speed and harsh
mark his heels made on the weak
beat. He could feel the snap
and citrus color of the melody
searing his soul. It was a dance
like fire and he needed fire.
In St. Petersburg they wanted
cool quadrilles, an evening
of fantasies on chic themes.
Here a man twisted and squirmed
in the arms of dark-eyed song.
Here a man courting wonder found
himself consumed by its flames.

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Bittersweet Nightshade

It has been months since I could walk this far.
At noon the fencerow thick with bittersweet
nightshade flashes with summer sun. There are
no clouds, no fleeing deer, no swirls of breeze,
nothing I remember from the last time
I was here. Now I lean my cane against
a post, lying back where the long stems climb
and scramble over everything that rests

in their way. I love to see these blue stars.
Their five points bend back to reveal a blunt
golden cone nestled in the heart of leaf
where in this light long shadows run like tears.
The wide yellow berries starting to run
toward red are the exact color of grief.

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SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH

The Acolyte of Grooming

The monkey in me grasped mutual grooming
signifies love, and has a calming effect.
Plus comes in handy for prickly problems
not resolvable by sole salvation:
big lobs of thin dead skin on the back, say,
after a bad sunburn. Like a kid
in a Shake'n Bake ad, I helped:
plucked eyebrows and tweezed out splinters,
squeezed blackheads, brushed thick dark coarse-

crowned heads. The youngest and lowest ranking,
I didn't receive the devotion
but made suntanned brunette elder sisters
more beautiful than they already were.
And then I'd get to watch the getting-ready
beyond the basic grooming: toenail painting,
for one thing, the color called tomato red.
The shaving of legs and armpits. The washing
of hair in milk or beer. The pancake make-up,
the cherry rouge, the big dark Maybelline lips—

the whole ceremony of getting
a man—going out with him in a car at night
and smooching, the quick jump then
to a wedding: the mystery's exact trajectory
I didn't quite get,
but I knew it all began with grooming
head to toe, and topping off with Evening in Paris
from a dark blue bottle—the odor,
as Mamma called it, could throttle a bull.

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NEAL BOWERS

The Look

for Nancy

The road behind recedes a little faster
as we pick up speed on the straightaway,
our house, our street,
the whole town held a moment
in a corner of the rearview frame,
bobbing there like a leaf
or a soft light on water,
gone in a wink,
the way a pattern or a face
emerges from the random grain
of stone or wood but stays
only as long as the eye can hold its gaze,
then vanishes, and no amount of staring
will recover it,
your face also in the mirror,
poised within the rushing moment,
lovelier for its sweet distraction
as you study the passing fields,
not noticing me looking.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Forty-Second Street

> Where the underworld can meet the elite,
> Naughty, gaudy, bawdy, sporty, Forty-second Street!
> —Al Dubin, lyrics to "Forty-Second Street" (1933)

YOU PROBABLY THOUGHT THOSE SCRUFFY THEATRES on Forty-second Street were born for porn, but in fact they started life after the turn of the century as splendid legitimate theatres. During the Depression, most became movie houses. The caliber of cinematic offerings dwindled over the years, as Forty-second Street between Times Square and Eighth Avenue became a venue for strip joints and peep shows, with hucksters outside peddling everything from drugs to eternal life. Then, in the early 1990s, city authorities began closing everything down, as part of a pretentious Times Square redevelopment plan. Soon, the theatres stood empty, with weird haiku poems on their marquees, the results of a contest dreamed up by some whimsical bureaucrat. When it was realized that New York City would not need any new office space for at least a generation, the redevelopment lost steam. Forty-second Street became a hazardous ghost town. In the old days, the crowds at least protected you from violent crime, but now the strip was a good place to get mugged. "Where the underworld can meet the elite" took on a new meaning.

Much to my surprise, restoration of the historic theatres on the block, once a mere adjunct to the office-oriented plan, is now moving forward on its own. The Walt Disney Company has taken over the New Amsterdam Theatre, on the south side of the block. This theatre was in terrible condition—when the recent Louis Malle film *Vanya on Forty-Second Street* was filmed in it, the filmmakers could only use the auditorium, because the stage was unsafe—but it was originally very beautiful, an art nouveau confection that housed many early Ziegfeld Follies. The New Amsterdam will open a year from now. This season, the Victory Theatre directly across the street has been restored and re-opened by The New 42nd Street, Inc., a nonprofit corporation with support from both government and private sources. Four other theatres on the street are scheduled for renovation, with a view to turning the block into another Lincoln Center. There will be legitimate theatres, movie houses, a large musical theatre formed by combining the Apollo and the Lyric Theatres, and (well, nothing is perfect) a branch of Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum.

The Victory—once known as the Republic, and now dubbed The New Victory Theatre—is the oldest theatre in Manhattan. It was built in 1900

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by Oscar Hammerstein, Senior, the father of the lyricist. David Belasco ran it for a dozen years, before moving to his own theatre, also still extant, a few blocks away. As the Republic, it enjoyed brisk business in the twenties, the most profitable decade in history for the American theatre. The Depression hit theatre hard, however. Billy Minsky took over the Republic in 1932, running it as Broadway's first striptease house until Mayor LaGuardia kicked burlesque out of New York in 1942. In a burst of wartime patriotism, the theatre was renamed the Victory, showing second-run motion pictures, and eventually pornography, for five decades.

The New Victory Theatre opened in December as a youth theatre. (Ironically, it is officially categorized as *Off*-Broadway.) The lovely Renaissance façade, which I used to point out to friends in its crumbling state, above the "XXX HOTTEST PORN IN TOWN" marquee, has been beautifully restored. Inside, the back of the theatre has been ripped out to form a bland set of modern lobbies (in 1900, such audience amenities were often limited), reducing the auditorium to a capacity of 500. As you enter, you thus pass through a strange succession of old-modern-old, but the auditorium, with its original decor, is wonderfully intimate, with excellent acoustics.

The first major production in the New Victory was Carlo Gozzi's *The Green Bird*, produced in March by Theatre for a New Audience, directed by Julie Taymor. It was an auspicious beginning. Taymor is a major contemporary director of theatre and opera. Her style is strongly visual, using masks, puppetry, mime, and Asian theatrical techniques. Unlike many hotshot directors these days, who seem to me to be visual artists posing as theatre artists, Taymor has a strong sense of character and plot, with an approach that is light, brisk, and witty.

Furthermore, Gozzi's plays lend themselves to bold theatrical interpretation. Written in eighteenth-century Italy in an attempt to revive the improvisational Commedia dell'Arte, they are loosely written to incorporate music, spectacular scenic effects, fairy-tale elements, exotic Oriental stories, and topical satire. Thus in modern times they have inspired operas (*Turandot, The Love for Three Oranges*), as well as the non-literary, theatricalist productions of Meyerhold and Vakhtangov. *The Green Bird* has a sprawling, fanciful story centering on a brother and sister of royal birth who have been raised by a sausage-seller and his wife. The source of their problems was the wicked old queen mother, their grandmother, who imprisoned their mother and ordered them killed. After many adventures, during which they meet all sorts of strange creatures including a talking statue, singing apples, and dancing water, they are restored to their rightful positions with the help of a magical green bird, who turns out to be an enchanted prince. The oversupply of fairy-tale elements makes the play tedious to read, but provides a wealth of opportunities for performance.

Taymor, who co-designed the show with Set Designer Christine Jones and Costume Designer Constance Hoffman, used a basically bare stage;

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the major visual elements were props, masks, and costumes. Colors were mostly blacks, whites, and grays, giving the play a cartoonish look; in fact, some of the characters seemed to have stepped out of the pages of *The New Yorker*. The masks were hilarious. Didi Conn as the sausage-seller's wife had a half mask with a big nose twisted to the side; Derek Smith as the dithering king had a big funny moon face that, because of the actor's expressive body and resonant voice, seemed to take on his mercurial emotions. The props, a result of Taymor's extensive study of puppetry, were often mobile. The talking statue, for example, was an eight-foot-high stone head like something from Easter Island, but with a movable mouth and rolling eyes. The green bird itself was a lively stick puppet manipulated in full view of the audience by Bruce Turk, who later became the prince.

Nevertheless, Taymor never exploited the brilliant images for their own sake. The characters were sharply delineated; it was always clear who was who, what was going on, and where the plot (silly and overcomplicated though it may have been) was going. Gozzi satirizes a lot of the attitudes of his own time, to which Taymor added modern satire. The king, for example, cursed his mother by calling her "Ging-rich!", to which she replied "Buchanan!" Recoiling in horror, the king cried, "Oh, Mother, that was low!" Taymor could also mock her own conventions, as when the king and the newly-freed queen kissed at the end, only to have the noses on their masks get in the way. Like all good children's theatre, *The Green Bird* was a delight for kids, but was really addressed to their parents.

John Robin Baitz has been compared with Arthur Miller, as a playwright of ethical conflict. His latest play, *A Fair Country*, opened at the Mitzi Newhouse Theatre in Lincoln Center in March; like his previous work, *Three Hotels*, it deals with the moral dilemmas of Americans working abroad in this age of uncertain American foreign policy. The story begins in 1978, with a diplomatic family living in South Africa. Harry Burgess is a cultural attaché, a minor post in a minor posting. He longs to get transferred to Western Europe, not only because it would provide a far more interesting life, but because his wife Patrice, a difficult, hard-drinking woman, is deteriorating emotionally because of their stagnant existence. A key incident has her beating a black servant, then calling the police when the servant retaliates by breaking a valuable pot. The scandal damages Harry's reputation, as well as the equilibrium of the already unstable family.

Harry gets a chance at a transfer to The Hague, as a Voice of America producer, but his boss demands a quid pro quo: Harry's older son Alec, an aspiring journalist, has a wide range of friends in the dissident South African community. If Harry will throw a party for them, thus learning their names and something about them, the information would be valuable to the United States in the event of future upheavals. Harry, a

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decent, sensitive man, is reluctant, but, desperate to escape, he acquiesces.

Act II has the Burgesses living in The Hague. Alec, who has been trying to establish a career in New York, comes for a visit via Johannesburg. He reports the awful truth he learned there: all his old friends are either dead or in jail. This devastating information destroys the family, bringing on Harry's divorce from his wife, and alienation from his sons. In a final scene in Mexico some years later, where the younger son is working on an isolated archeological dig, we learn that Harry is dead of cancer, and that Alec himself was assassinated in South Africa, either by the government, or, in retaliation for the betrayal of his friends, by the dissidents.

A Fair Country is far more dramatic than *Three Hotels*, a static piece functioning entirely through retrospective narrative. But where the earlier play raised large ethical questions—specifically, about the ruthless activities of international corporations, and the resultant moral degradation of their employees—*A Fair Country* remains on a personal level. Although all the Burgesses seem vaguely progressive, filled with outrage about hypocrisy and oppression, their moral sense is unfocused. Nor is there much connection between their political attitudes and their misfortune; Harry's central, tragic decision is triggered more by his wife's psychological problems than political issues, a fact that no one in the play (including the self-righteous sons) seems to acknowledge. Nor is the wife given sufficient self-awareness to turn her into a tragic heroine herself. Nevertheless, the characters are richly defined, with complex, vivid, authentic interrelationships.

Daniel Sullivan directed the Lincoln Center production skillfully. Sets by Tony Walton, costumes by Jane Greenwood, and lighting by James F. Ingalls were all impressive. The Newhouse is a small theatre, but there was no stinting on production elements; both the diplomatic residences, in South Africa and Holland, were suitably imposing. Laurence Luckinbill and Judith Ivey were fine as Harry and Patrice, and were matched by a mostly strong supporting cast. Dan Futterman (who also plays an earnest son in the movie *The Birdcage*) was compelling as Alec, but Matt McGrath tended to get tense and screechy as his younger brother. I especially liked Richard Clarke in a tricky little role as a retired Dutch diplomat; the character is a master at hiding his feelings, but Clarke was always able to show subtly *what* he was hiding.

One of the best new American plays I saw this season was Andrew C. Ordover's *Motherland*, which I happened upon in a little theatre in the wilds of Manhattan's SoHo, across the street from a truck depot. The play is set in a small Slovak town in 1990, when Russian domination has just ended in Czechoslovakia, and freedom and democracy are being restored. There are also framing scenes in Paris, where the new Czechoslovakian President (named Vasek, but modeled on Vaclav Havel) is trying to persuade an expatriate Czech writer to return home.

In cosmopolitan Paris, the conflict is between the President's ideal-

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ism, and the writer's cynicism; is something new happening in Czechoslovakia, or is it just the Prague Spring all over again? Back in the little town of Kaknia, however, the issues are not so philosophical, nor so clearly polarized. Most people are happy to see the Russians leave, but the habits of decades are not so easily banished. A schoolteacher, Elena, longs to establish modern teaching methods at her school, but is blocked by an unreconstructed Principal who still must be addressed as "Comrade." Elena's husband, Milan, once an idealistic young Communist, is now an alcoholic timeserver finding it hard to adjust to a world where he can lose his job as a construction worker. Their son, Jan, a would-be artist just home from army service, drifts in the new social order, which he finds promising but confusing. His girlfriend Katka, a music student at the university, notes bitterly that their culture remains vague and undefined; now, instead of watching Russian movies, they watch American ones.

Into this murky backwater arrives a classic American innocent abroad named Todd, a young schoolteacher on some kind of exchange program. He is a representative of the very democratic, capitalist culture toward which Czechoslovakia is supposedly moving. He also epitomizes all the weaknesses of that culture—estranged from his parents, separated from his wife, ignorant of history, languages, or politics, he is hyper-individualism personified. Nevertheless, with that boundless enthusiasm and naive charm for which Americans are notorious, he manages to enthrall the Kaknians.

Todd's philosophy of life is that great American aphorism, "shit happens," which he interprets as meaning that "there's no plan to anything. A doesn't lead to B. B just happens—by itself." This ahistorical view of life, so cynical and anti-Marxist, is both stimulating and disturbing. Todd's name, notes Elena, means "death" in German. The arrival of Todd, and all he stands for, certainly means a death for the traditional Communist way of life in Kaknia, and for the stability of Elena's family. Todd encourages Elena to build her own school, as an annex on the old one—and the townspeople burn it down. He ends up in bed with Elena, and, later, with Katka, destroying their relationships with their men. Then, like a passing hurricane, he abruptly leaves town to return to the United States. The immediate cause of his leaving is the news that his father is dying of cancer, which holds out some hope that he may at least become reconciled in that relationship, but then, running away is so typical of Todd's behavior that his father's illness seems little more than an excuse to cut and run. On the other hand, some months later, when Elena has pretty well written him off, she receives a present from him—a carton of books.

Ordover has written *Motherland* in a series of fragmented scenes, so that indeed, A doesn't lead to B. Yet nonetheless, the play has a clear, overall story with important allegorical overtones. It is not just about the former Communist world and the appalling problems it faces, but about our own world, which is so fluid and amoral. If Elena's school annex—

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the capitalist world grafted onto the Communist—cannot work, what are we left with? "Shit happens." Or, do the books Todd sends, and the culture they represent, have the resiliency to bring about rejuvenation?

The Common Ground Stage and Film Company performed the play at the Greenwich Street Theatre. They are a young company, with varying degrees of ability. Eddie Hougan was a delight as Todd, with casual charm and a winning smile covering a touch of unease. Sheryl Moller was a terrific Elena; even though she is younger than the character she was playing, she brought a full sense of a complex personal and cultural history to the role. David Garrett as the expatriate writer, and Mischa Kischkum as Milan, were both also young, but could not create their characters' age and backgrounds in the way that Moller did. This was particularly a problem with Garrett, whose character's refusal to return to Czechoslovakia just seemed to result from petulance, rather than from long, sad experience. Nonetheless, Director Shira Piven handled the cast deftly, staging the entire play within the initial café setting, with the constant changes of locale being suggested minimally but clearly. It was a strong production of a very well-written play.

August Wilson is the best American historical playwright ever. The plays of our other leading playwrights—O'Neill, Odets, Miller, Williams, Albee—are usually set in contemporary times, or, like Miller's *The Crucible*, are allegories about contemporary issues. O'Neill set plays in the thirteenth century, in 1827, in 1850, and in 1865, but they always ended up being about his own personal hang-ups.

Wilson, by contrast, has an interest in American history for its own sake. A high school dropout, he describes himself as a graduate of the free Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, where he grew up. (He would spend his days playing hooky from school in order to read in the library!) It is hard to find Wilson himself in his plays; his personal life, after a decade of fame as a playwright, remains a mystery. Nor are his plays allegories about the problems of African-Americans today. We become involved with his characters and their times for their own sake, and only secondarily relate them to our own era.

Wilson's latest play, *Seven Guitars*, is set in 1948. The postwar period was one of new opportunities for blacks in America, especially in music. Innovative jazz stars like Charlie Parker, and blues stars like Muddy Waters, achieved fortune and fame beyond the black community. The hero of *Seven Guitars*, Floyd Barton, is a blues guitarist who has had one hit record, but made no money on it; he foolishly agreed to a flat fee rather than a royalty. Floyd is talented and charming, but, dogged by bad luck and wrong choices, is drifting through life with dreams of stardom that he will never achieve.

The play is set, like most of Wilson's dramatic works, in the Mission Hill district of Pittsburgh. All the action takes place in the backyard of a tenement where Vera, Floyd's former girlfriend, lives along with a

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number of colorful neighbors, including a garrulous, tubercular old man named Hedley, who ekes out a living selling cigarettes and his own barbecued chicken, which he raises and slaughters in the backyard. Floyd returns to the tenement to win back Vera, whom he had left for another woman (another wrong choice); he has just spent ninety days in the workhouse for vagrancy. Vera is deeply hurt by Floyd's philandering, yet still in love with him; their tortuous relationship is the basis for much of the action of the play. Floyd wants to take her with him to Chicago for another recording gig that he hopes this time will bring him success. Chicago and stardom take on the mystique that Moscow has in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, elusive, fascinating, and ultimately unachievable. "Maybe I can be a different person up there," sighs Vera. On the radio, we hear a big Joe Louis boxing match; sports were another way that blacks were achieving stardom.

To get money for the trip, and to get his guitar out of hock, Floyd takes part in a robbery where an accomplice gets killed. The money leads to more trouble. In the end, Hedley, drunk and deranged, murders Floyd with the machete he uses on the chickens; the undercurrent of violence that runs throughout the play becomes overt. As in Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the focus is on the violence blacks do to other blacks. There is white racism in the background of the play, including the phony "vagrancy" laws, which gave cops the excuse to jail blacks at will, or the nefarious recording company that exploited Floyd. It is also significant that the police do not even bother to investigate Floyd's death; Hedley, dazed and sickly, just goes on living in the backyard, singing snatches of blues songs. But, as always, Wilson does not depict his characters as mere passive victims, but as free agents.

I saw *Seven Guitars* in Los Angeles at the huge Ahmanson Theatre, which is usually used for musicals; *Phantom of the Opera* played there for years. It says a lot about the magnificent cast that they were easily able to fill the vast space, vocally and emotionally, without electronic amplification. The two leads, Keith David as Floyd and Viola Davis as Vera, are both graduates of the Juilliard School, our best acting conservatory, while several others studied at top American theatre schools. Anyone who thinks that good actor training consists of learning to speak with a posh accent while losing the ability to play raw, naturalistic roles should take note! Lloyd Richards, who has directed all of Wilson's previous major plays, staged this one with his usual skill, orchestrating the voices (the "seven guitars") and the action beautifully. I also liked Scott Bradley's strongly vertical, naturalistic set, with long, steep stairs leading up to the tenement, which helped create striking spatial relationships. *Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway in late March, where it will probably win another round of awards for the amazing August Wilson.

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BERT CARDULLO

Smoke and Tears

Mamma Roma (1962) was the second film that Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote and directed, but it did not receive its American premiere until 1995 for legal reasons beyond my comprehension. Although this picture betrays the influence of Italian neorealism, like Pasolini's earlier *Accattone* (1961) it transcends neorealism even as it pays tribute to the movement. And, like this filmmaker's subsequent work, *Mamma Roma* reveals a peculiar mixture of Marxism, Catholicism, and Freudian psychology. It also reveals Pasolini's concern with that part of the working class known as the subproletariat, which for him includes pre-industrial peasants as well as non-industrial whores, thieves, bums, and pimps. Such marginal types are featured in all his films from *Accattone* to the Sadean *Salò* (1975), even in Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* (1967) and *Medea* (1969).

If the early *Mamma Roma* is of a piece with the rest of Pier Paolo Pasolini's cinematic *oeuvre*, the same cannot be said of Wayne Wang's latest movie, *Smoke*. This is the last film I would have expected Wang to make after his series of pictures on Chinese-American life, none of which has anything in common with the artistry of *Smoke*. Let me quickly add, as far as the thematic unity of this chronicle is concerned, that there's not much artistic connection between *Smoke* and *Mamma Roma*, either. Indeed, there's not much connection between *Smoke* and anything! I'll begin with a consideration of this subtle, even sublime work, whose meaning is not as immediately apparent, or describable, as that of Pasolini's movie and therefore will require more, or more carefully framed, excavation.

To quote Richard Gilman on the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Wayne Wang's new film, from a screenplay by the novelist Paul Auster, is about nothing—with precision. Which is not to say that *Smoke* doesn't have a plot, or in this instance several interconnected stories, but that the film's meaning can't really be extracted from its plot. Its plot is an excuse, if you will, for its title or for the activity indicated by that title. And it's in the activity of smoking that you will find what meaning the movie has. The fact that smoking has nearly become criminalized in America today lends all the more daring to the film's central conceit. "Tobacco today, sex tomorrow . . . in the next three or four years, it will be illegal to smile at a stranger," declares one of *Smoke*'s characters. Not by accident, he groups together here three acts of sheer pleasure yet limited utility—or let us say, in the case of heterosexual intercourse, secondary purposefulness. One could add to his list the poetry of art as

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it exists apart from the art of political propaganda, for in *Smoke* you will find a literary artist, a photographic one, and a sketcher of the thing-ness of this world.

The photographer is Auggie Wren, who owns the Brooklyn Cigar Company in Park Slope, the tobacco shop around which much of the action of *Smoke* revolves. But Auggie's "life work," in his words, is not managing this store but rather taking snapshots of it every morning at 8. He has been taking such photographs, all from the same exterior angle, for eleven consecutive years and has around 4,000 of them to show for his efforts. Among Auggie's steady customers at the Brooklyn Cigar Company is the novelist Paul Benjamin, who complains, after flipping through the Wren photo collection one night, that the pictures all look the same. Auggie responds that his friend will "never get it" if he doesn't slow down to note the subtle differences among people, weather, and light from photograph to photograph. *Smoke* then itself slows down to let us examine a series of these black-and-white still photos, blown up to the size of a movie screen. Auggie doesn't say so, but his implicit point—especially as a smoker himself—is that one way of slowing down is to have a smoke.

For smoking is paradoxically a delicious moment in time and, in its inutility, a savory moment out of time, a little work of art unto itself in the magical insubstantiality of its delicate puffs. And the mystery of tobacco—its danger and eroticism, its foulness and beauty, its arrogance and evanescence—only enhances our appreciation of the mystery, the sheer multitude or denseness, that underlies life's dailiness, which is far more complicated and enriching than art works could ever make it out to be. Doubtless far more complicated and enriching, ironically, than Paul Auster's novels themselves (like *The Music of Chance* [1990], filmed in 1993), which seek to impose man-made patterns or designs on otherwise desultory dailiness and only artificially—worse, portentously—inflate its mystery as a result. Paul Benjamin, clearly a stand-in for Auster in *Smoke*, has published three or four novels but has long been unable to write when we meet up with him. One reason for his block is his pregnant wife's accidental murder in a street shoot-out three to four years before the film begins in 1990; the other is, perhaps, his need to complicate his vision of the world by taking the time to observe it more closely.

Smoke is divided into five sections, each preceded by a title that consists of a person's name. Paul's story is number one; it's followed by Rashid's story, with which it is intertwined. Rashid is a vagrant black teenager who has saved Paul from accidentally being run down by traffic, and who takes the latter up on his grateful offer of a place to "crash" for a few days. Rashid is "vagrant" because he's on the run from his own neighborhood, where he happened upon a robbery in progress and therefore can identify the robbers, who now want to silence him and retrieve the paper bag containing $5,000 that he picked up at the scene. This young black man is also vagrant because he's in search of his biological father, Cyrus, whom he hasn't seen for twelve years. Rashid

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himself doesn't smoke when we meet him, but he does get a part-time job in Auggie's tobacco shop, and he engages in activities that suggest the ideal smoker's relaxed or detached state of mind: reading (Paul Benjamin's novels), watching baseball on television with Paul, and drawing lots of pictures.

Cyrus Cole, the father, is a cigar smoker, and his story is the fourth one in the film. Cyrus runs a garage in Peekskill, New York, where he has remarried and fathered another child. His first wife, Rashid's mother, died in an automobile crash that he says he caused, that cost him one of his arms, and that left Rashid in the custody of an aunt. This son finds his dad in Peekskill but goes unrecognized by Cyrus; they have a shaky reunion after the boy finally reveals his true identity; then everybody—joined by Paul and Auggie on a visit to the country—gathers outside around a picnic table, where there are only food, silence, and smoke. This scene is followed by a cutaway long shot of an elevated train snaking its way through the New York cityscape and out of the frame, after which the camera holds on the image in "dead time" before moving on to Auggie's story. A similar sequence opened *Smoke*, and I'm inclined to believe that in a movie like this one such cutaway- and dead-time shots are not mere cinematic punctuation devices. Rather, they are designed, like smoking itself, to slow us down and direct our attention to the world from which the film's neat fictions have been drawn, for the purpose of underlining the mystery and inviolability, the integrity and permanence, the redemption and sovereignty, of that world.

Still, the fictions continue to be spun out of Auggie Wren's smoke shop, and Auggie himself plays the central role in story number five, while number three belongs to his ex-girlfriend Ruby. He hasn't seen her for about eighteen years, yet she journeys from Pittsburgh to Brooklyn to ask him for money, which she says she needs to help get her eighteen-year-old pregnant daughter (Felicity, who may also be Auggie's daughter) off drugs. Auggie is suspicious—all the more so after meeting the spectacularly hostile Felicity, who has aborted her child and desires only the solicitude of her Puerto Rican boyfriend. But Auggie magnanimously gives Ruby the money anyway just before parting from her: $5,000, which he had originally invested in the purchase of contraband Cuban cigars; which cigars Rashid had accidentally destroyed while working at the tobacco store; and for which destruction Rashid had paid Auggie back with the $5,000 he found at the scene of the robbery and has been hiding in Paul's apartment (the robbers themselves having subsequently, and serendipitously, been killed during an attempted jewel heist). Instead of viewing this $5,000 as part of some symbolic pattern intended by Auster—together with Auggie's 4,000 photos and the four to five months Paul Benjamin's wife, Ellen, had been pregnant at her death—I prefer to see the money as a mere connective device among the film's story strands, a kind of smoke of its own wafting through the air.

Auggie tells a tale within the story strand of *Smoke* allotted to him, and

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that tale is a telling paradigm of what could be called the intelligent smoker's simultaneous distance or time-out from and participation in the flux of life. As Auggie and Paul sit eating lunch at a delicatessen, the former relates a Christmas story that he says actually happened in 1976. He also says that Paul can use it as the basis for the Christmas story that the *New York Times* has asked him to write for its Op-Ed page. (Paul Auster himself published "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" in the *Times* in 1990; Wayne Wang read it, sought out Auster, and suggested that they develop it into a screenplay, which they did by working backward from the original tale.)

The story begins with Auggie's finding the wallet of a young black man who lost it on the street in his haste to get away after stealing a few magazines from the tobacco shop. Instead of prosecuting the thief, whose name and address he now had, Auggie decided to show leniency and simply return the wallet on Christmas day. But the young man, Roger Goodwin, wasn't home and clearly had not been for some time; the woman at the door, however—his blind grandmother—was so happy to see anyone that she convincingly pretended Auggie was Roger and invited him into her apartment. He reciprocated by accepting the role of her grandson, and they spent the holiday together eating a chicken dinner purchased by Auggie. At the end of the day, with grandma asleep, Auggie cleaned up, left Roger's wallet on the table, and exited with a 35-millimeter camera—one of a number of such cameras stolen by the grandson and stored in his grandmother's bathroom. This is the one he has used and continues to use every day, mounted atop a tripod, to photograph the corner in front of his store. End of story, which Paul isn't sure he believes. Then, under the closing credits, we see the story as Auggie says it occurred—except that it's in black and white, like Auggie's documentary photos of the Brooklyn Cigar Company and environs.

The implication, of course, is that Paul Benjamin breaks through his writer's block by publishing "Auggie Wren's Christmas Story" in the *New York Times*. The reason for the resumption of writing and publishing appears to be Paul's return to the world of living and looking, waiting and watching, listening and loving—a return surely facilitated by the happy combination of his penchant for smoking and his friendship with Auggie. The very cinematic style of *Smoke* exemplifies the patient, considerate, companionable yet alert smoker's pose in which we find Paul listening to Auggie's story at the delicatessen table. As much as possible Wang and his cinematographer, Adam Holender, compose scenes in long takes, with cool or airy colors, in the medium-to-full range, while they frequently end scenes with slow fades to black rather than abrupt cuts. It's only when Auggie is telling his Christmas story toward the end that the camera moves closer, even to extreme close-up on the storyteller's mouth, whence the words are coming from which we must draw our own big picture.

I've read that Wayne Wang and Paul Auster had some budgetary

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money left over when they finished *Smoke*, got a bit more, and, in the same Brooklyn cigar-store setting, made a follow-up film titled *Blue in the Face*. It features much improvisation from a celebrity cast that includes Roseanne, Madonna, Michael J. Fox, and Jim Jarmusch (whose own filmic experiments are related to *Smoke*'s). The only major character remaining from the first version is the tobacco-shop owner, Auggie, played in both instances by Harvey Keitel. Hmmm. I'm not so sure that this smoke-experiment can be pulled off twice; I'm even less certain that it can be done using improvised scenes, let alone non-actors, big acts, and bad acting. *Smoke* works in part because of the general terseness and even quiet of its script, together with the thoughtful understatement of its acting from actors not known for understating anything. (In addition to Keitel, I'm thinking especially of William Hurt in the role of Paul Benjamin.) Take away the laconic writing and acting (not to mention Wang's own unobtrusive directing and Rachel Portman's spare, incidental music), add the blubber of Roseanne, the blather of Michael J. Fox, and the bluster of Madonna, and you'll create a suffocating smoke screen rather than an exhilarating smoke signal. I'll pass on *Blue in the Face*, whereas I light up to *Smoke*.

Two things you won't find in *Mamma Roma* are a "quiet" script and a lot of understated acting, since Anna Magnani performs the titular role and the film is about the *cafoni* who swell the population of Italy's capital. Magnani played the heroine of another, more famous movie with Rome in its title—Roberto Rossellini's neorealist landmark *Rome, Open City* (1945)—and her character in Pasolini's picture seems to be a resurrection of that heroine, albeit from a reverse angle, as well as a commentary on the often idealized portrayal of the lower classes in the socially critical, sometimes politically programmatic films of Italian neorealism. For Pina, the character played by Magnani in *Open City*, is an icon of proletarian strength who refuses to lower her moral standards in order to improve her economic standing, and who is pregnant when she's callously murdered by the German Gestapo for sheltering a leader of the Italian Resistance. Mamma Roma, by contrast, is a prostitute with the petty ideal of social ascent from the subproletariat into the petite bourgeoisie, not Pina's wartime ideal of a free and democratic Italy. And Mamma Roma is the unwed mother of a teenaged son who dies at the hands of the Italian police, not the expectant victim of a foreign occupying force. Mamma Roma is never addressed by a personal name during the film; she is always identified by her public nickname, which comes to signify not only her dual status as mother and whore, but also the prostituted nature of a Rome, an Italy, itself beset by petty, egoistic consumerism during the years of its so-called economic boom.

The movie opens with the image of Mamma Roma shepherding three little pigs into the wedding reception of her former pimp, Carmine, and his bride. Carmine ironically refers to the pigs as "Brothers of Italy," which is the title of the national anthem and suggests the level to which Italians have been reduced by the greedy self-interest, the material

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opportunism, of the postwar period. Pasolini contradistinguishes his countrymen's vulgar materialism not only by making all the celebrants of this holy marriage pimps, whores, and confidence men, but also by grouping them around the banquet table in such a way that the scene resembles da Vinci's painting of *The Last Supper.* Indeed, the reception is topped off by a parody of the "Hallelujah Chorus" during which Mamma Roma and Carmine antiphonally sing insults at each other, so happy are they to be ending their miserably symbiotic relationship. Carmine will now settle down in the countryside surrounding Rome with his new wife; and from that same countryside Mamma Roma will retrieve her only son, the sixteen-year-old Ettore, whom she had abandoned as a little boy at a church orphanage, to begin a new life in Rome selling produce from a stall in the marketplace.

That new life includes a new apartment in a suburban housing project, the view from which is dominated by the shining dome of a modern church. However, spiritual renewal is not the protagonist's goal in *Mamma Roma,* despite the fact that she attends Mass. Her real reason for going to church is to find a rich man's daughter for Ettore or, failing that, to target a businessman who can be persuaded to give her boy a job. Mamma Roma had asked her parish priest to get her son a position, but upon learning that the passive, disaffected Ettore has little or no education and no trade, this kindly man advised the youth's mother either to send him to vocational school or to work as a laborer. Mamma Roma indignantly rejects the latter alternative on the ground that a blue-collar job is simply not good enough for her boy. The priest's response to her false pride is telling: "You can't build something on nothing," he says, which can also be taken to mean that you can't escape the naturalistic pull of the past—of your heredity and environment—unless you make yourself over from within.

Mamma Roma tries to make herself and Ettore over from without, through the trappings of petit bourgeois materialism, instead of attempting a spiritual regeneration, by which Pasolini does not necessarily mean a Catholic or religious one. The result is that for one form of prostitution—the literal kind she has practiced for thirty of her forty-three years—she merely substitutes another, the figurative kind of capitalist economics, which reduces human beings to exploitable pieces of merchandise at the same time as it defines happiness in terms of the number of consumer products people themselves acquire. Mamma Roma wants such "nice things" for her son, who doesn't have the skills to exchange for them, so she behaves like the prostitute she is, in spirit if not at the moment in fact, by blackmailing the proprietor of a popular restaurant into giving Ettore a job as a waiter. And, of course, she can perpetrate her scheme against the prosperous restaurateur only by enlisting the aid of cronies from her immediate past. They are the whore Biancofiore and her pimp, Zacaria, who manipulate this married man into a compromising position from which Mamma Roma "miraculously" rescues him—only to demand the employment of her son in return.

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Another crony from Mamma Roma's past soon tries to enlist *her* aid: her former pimp, the twenty-six-year-old Carmine, who has given up on married life in the country and wants to borrow a few hundred dollars for investment in a meat-selling venture. She tells him she doesn't have the money, but he replies that she can get it if she returns to hustling. If Mamma Roma refuses, Carmine will tell Ettore the truth about her life as a whore—a truth his mother has not revealed to the boy because she herself has not yet come to terms with, or atoned for, her past. In other words, just as Mamma Roma has blackmailed the restaurant owner, her pimp blackmails her. She gives in to Carmine's demand that she return to the street, but Ettore finds out about her past anyway, precisely because she has made it the present and word of her nocturnal exploits has spread back to her son. What's a mother, or a whore, to do? And what is a son to do except follow in his mother's footsteps, duplicating her acts of bad faith? After all, Mamma Roma's idea of maternal love is to ask Biancofiore to sleep with her son so as to win him away from Bruna, a twenty-four-year-old unwed mother who sleeps with others besides Ettore, often at no charge.

Ettore quits his waiter's job in a combination of anger and self-pity at the discovery of his mother's prostitution, then turns back to the thieving with which he began the film by stealing first a chocolate bar from a street vendor and next a phonograph record from his mother. With the help of *his* cronies, teenaged delinquents from public housing, Ettore attempts to steal a portable radio from a sleeping patient in a hospital ward, where the boys pose as visitors. But he is caught when the man wakes up and screams "thief." It's not by accident that the hospitalized man is played by Lamberto Maggiorani, who played the role of Ricci in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), the father who turns in desperation to stealing after he himself has been robbed. The difference between Ricci's thievery and Ettore's is fundamental, then: the former tries to steal back the bicycle that was stolen from him, for without it he cannot keep the job with which he supports his family; whereas the latter has quit his job and steals in order to assert his subproletarian identity as well as to spite his mother. Moreover, unlike Ricci, who is reunited with—and spiritually buffered by—his young son after his apprehenders decline to press charges against him, Ettore dies of fever in a prison hospital calling for Mamma Roma, whom he never sees again.

Strapped to a table in an isolation cell, he is photographed from above at such a low angle that he ironically resembles Christ on the cross. There has been no spiritual resurrection in Ettore's earthly life, so he must die a painful, lonely, bodily death to complement his mother's soulful one. After she learns of her son's death, Mamma Roma tries to commit suicide by jumping from the window of her apartment, but is prevented from doing so by friends. Nonetheless, she dies inside herself as she attempts to wriggle from her rescuers' hold, even as Pina was machine-gunned to a literal death when she tried to break free of the grip of Nazi soldiers toward the end of *Rome, Open City*. But Pina's

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sacrifice was not in vain, the Christian humanism of Rossellini implies, for it and the execution of her priest, Don Pietro, are followed in the final scene by the auspicious, becalming shot of children walking toward the city against a sky dominated by the dome of Saint Peter's.

If *Mamma Roma*'s Christian references are ironic, unlike those of *Open City*, its secular or nonreligious imagery is straightforward. Circular forms such as cycle wheels, phonograph records, and merry-go-rounds appear throughout *Mamma Roma* in order to suggest the circular or static, nondirectional or dead-end, nature of the main characters' lives. The impression of stasis or entrapment in *Mamma Roma* is created, of course, by the very nature of the heroine's profession, whoring, which is not designed to produce children and extend anyone's family line. Prostitution literally feeds off itself, in the process promoting infertility as well as sexual gratification for its own sake. In Mamma Roma's case, however, gratuitous (but not cost-free!) sexual acts have led to the birth of a son, and a son to whom she is more Mamma Jocasta than suckling madonna, let alone the mother of all Rome itself. This is a son, remember, whom she has not brought up herself, of whose relations with young women she is jealous, with whom she dances in an overtly sensual manner upon their reunion in her Rome apartment, and whom she even affectionately calls her pimp at one point. Theirs, then, is an essentially barren relationship in the sense that the erotic subtext of this relationship may in part be what keeps Mamma Roma from forming a healthy bond with a male her own age, and what drives her son into the arms of whores like his mother.

I hope it's clear from the preceding discussion that I believe *Mamma Roma* to be a far richer work than do most critics, who generally regard it as a bad copy of Pasolini's first film, *Accattone.* It's true that the two movies have much in common: their subject, the use of a number of nonprofessional actors, their stark, black-and-white cinematography, and their music (although Bach on the soundtrack in *Accattone* ironically counterpoints the world of pimps, prostitutes, and street-fighters, whereas *Mamma Roma* relies heavily on Vivaldi to intensify its narrative's sense of foreboding). But there are two chief differences between *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma.* Number one, the plot of the second film is more contrived than that of the first, conveniently returning Carmine to Rome to haunt his former prostitute and inflicting a deadly fever upon Ettore when it is time for his mother's *pietà.* Number two, *Mamma Roma* has Anna Magnani to make us forget about those contrivances and concentrate instead on her virtuoso, indeed operatic, yet utterly truthful and committed performance. In a sense, she contains the film. I find myself blinking at this statement, since most films "contain" their characters and since bravura acting of itself has never interested me. But that's the point: this is bravura acting that goes *beyond* itself in its brave revelation of character and thus of theme. It requires only one word in response: brava!

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Abstract Visions/Metropolitan Lives

"TOTAL RISK, FREEDOM, DISCIPLINE," THE GUGGENHEIM'S grand winter survey of twentieth-century abstract art, is a handsome, engaging exhibition and, at the same time, embodies a good deal of what is wrong with museums as institutions of art-education today. The prerequisites for a show of this kind are many and varied, but I would say that the most important are these: the chronology and the major names and movements have to be in place, well-represented and accurately linked in relation to one another. (That's the elementary part, obviously.) Secondly, some proportion is needed: how extensively one artist—or even one style, one decade, or one region—is to be displayed implies certain notions about the development of modern art that should be fair and cogent, even if not universally agreed-upon. Next, everybody *but everybody* has got to learn something new from spending time at such an exhibition; the subject is too vast, complex, and exciting to allow for a sense of neatness or closure. Scholars of the French Revolution or the Jazz Age don't believe that the last word has been said in their fields—that's why Simon Schama's *Citizens* or Ann Douglas' *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* are such important intellectual events. A "general introduction" isn't needed this late in the day. And, lastly, a cultural immersion like "Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline" must posit connections to our own time, must explain (not merely in the catalogue text, but by way of what is on the walls) why the subject under consideration is a living issue. The disappointment of the much-touted "High/Low" pop-culture-into-art show at MoMA in 1990 was that it had more to say about its theme in relation to Picasso and Léger and Warhol than it did to the painting of the 1980s.

In all of these matters, the Guggenheim effort was more than a little frustrating. It began well and with eminent plausibility: Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich are by any standards among the prime movers, and the first stretch of the spiral was given over to excellent examples of their differing approaches—reductive and philosophical, or animated and expressive—to the evocation of "non-objective reality." There was something particularly satisfying about this terse, proud selection following on the heels of the Malevich and Mondrian retrospectives in New York and the recent showing of Kandinsky's "Composition" series at the Modern. Rounding the bend, though, we were walloped with an unsettling critical statement. Americans, apparently, had no interest in the Great Experiment in its early period. A single Marsden Hartley, the

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1914 *Aero*, hung next to a single Robert Delaunay (so much for the pretensions of Orphism), looking like a none-too-smart little kid lost at the circus. (*Aero* isn't one of Hartley's stronger compositions or more richly painted canvases, not by a long shot.) No cameo appearance for Arthur Dove or Patrick Henry Bruce or Georgia O'Keeffe or Stuart Davis or Hans Hofmann (though space was available for *nine* Robert Rymans and *seven* Ellsworth Kellys later, totalling six alcoves of the spiral), and for anyone hoping to see what the Synchromists Morgan Russell or Stanton Macdonald-Wright would look like in this context, the surprise was that they might as well never have put brush to canvas. Hartley, Dove, Russell, Macdonald-Wright: these are precisely the lesser-known byways that a fresh vision of abstraction would want to explore, even if they do not hold their own with Kandinsky and Mondrian. Complete successes are not always as revelatory as fits-and-starts and daring near-misses. One of the wall plaques tries to cover for these curatorial decisions by pretending they were not decisions at all: "The fully written history of abstract art would require a multi-volume encyclopedia . . ." No, it doesn't *require* an encyclopedia; there is a vast space between a tome and a subjective choice of highlights, and it was in that space that most of us thought "Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline" would work its magic, suggest new perspectives, reinvent a tired tale. But it didn't quite work out that way.

To be sure, full justice is done to certain artists and styles. The Minimalists are out in force, and the first generation of the New York School is given its due, and minor artists like Lucio Fontana have their token entries tucked into appropriately ignominious spots. A wise move was made in not presenting the Abstract Expressionists as too tight a unit, and in this area the more personal choices made by curator Mark Rosenthal seem fair and even admirable in their frankness. Morris Louis' is an overblown reputation and so he is nowhere in sight; a nod is made in the direction of Helen Frankenthaler and Sam Francis, but beyond a nod, Rosenthal won't go. But the Mark Rothkos, for instance, are in the rotunda, set apart from Still, Kline, Newman & Co., glowing and glowering in their separate alcoves, majestically beautiful, and absolutely confident of their place in the art of our century and the fact that they have something to *say*. The battered faith of the earliest abstractionists that they were creating visual music with metaphorical and even spiritual meaning was, we are reminded, still alive in a vestigial way in the postwar years.

The most innovative and informative aspect of the exhibition was off the ramp in a gallery that constituted a perfect little time capsule. This room was a recreation of the style of the original Guggenheim on East 54th Street (known as the Museum of Non-Objective Art), the brain-child of Solomon Guggenheim and his curator-counselor Hilla Rebay. Here we broke out of the "line" of the story to good effect: in a space whose floor was carpeted and walls covered with thick velour drapings, with classical music piped in, a bench at the ready, and the paintings

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hung only several inches off the floor, another way of presenting abstract art and another approach to the art experience itself were manifest. To the lover of the white-walls-and-don't-even-think-of-sitting mode, Rebay's inner sanctum might feel quaint and schoolmarmish, but that doesn't really matter. The point, in this otherwise simplifying pageant, is that we were finally allowed a sense of art as more than a list of famous names in proper order with uniform methods of presentation. It was not coincidental that this was the only section of the Guggenheim where one was likely to encounter unfamiliar artists (Rolph Scarlett? Rudolf Bauer? Rebay herself?), who—while they did not reach a level of achievement akin to de Kooning or Kandinsky—are nonetheless part of the story of *how* abstract art came to mean what it did in modern culture. They were people who understood total risk, freedom, and discipline as well.

In some ways, the side galleries provided Rosenthal with much more leeway than the spiral ever could have. Eva Hesse, whose description of abstraction's demands gave the show its title, is a "must" in this context, obviously, and there is no question about her organic constructions needing their own flat, enclosed space. Likewise for the expansiveness of Clyfford Still and the vigor of Franz Kline. (The "slant" and the low ceilings of the rotunda scuttled Frank Stella pretty definitively.) At moments, the temptation arose simply to blame the building for what went wrong (or never quite right enough) with "Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline," but, in fact, there is no excuse for the *thud* with which this long-awaited exhibition ended. Instead of being left with the impression that abstract art has a future in our time, despite the significant obstacles it faces (e.g., fewer patrons and advocates in the critical press, an indifferent audience, tired and impatient artists), we were left with an aura of diminishment, or thinness, that doesn't appear to be intentional. Gerhard Richter's layered forests of paint are just not good enough stand-ins for all the practitioners of abstract art at work today and, while Martin Puryear might be a good exemplar of what is being done in abstract sculpture, no one is going to be converted on the basis of *Night and Day* (1984) and two of his other least inspired works. The Puryears fit the poor space they have to inhabit rather well, but one fears that the space determined their selection rather than their visionary boldness and capable construction. The result was to send everyone back for another look at the Rothkos and the Pollocks.

Sad to say, too often the name of the game in the museum world today is "tell them what they know, give them what they want," and this exhibition had a bit of that quality to it. It was an ideal show for a student just learning about modern art, but that was surely not its purpose. How dispiriting, how unadventurous. How inimical to the character of the enterprise the exhibition was chronicling. Three cheers for Hilla Rebay's wacky, earnest, overdecorated room—Bach, velour, and all—reminding us of a needier, more searching, less complacent time.

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After a long hiatus, the early twentieth-century American painters known as "the Ashcan school" artists have been back on prominent display in the 1990s. One traveling show, which originated in Milwaukee and stopped at the Brooklyn Museum in the spring of 1992, focused on a few of these painters in an art-historical context, as part of a stylistically diverse, anti-academic group known as "The Eight." A 1994 exhibition shown at the Metropolitan and at museums in Fort Worth, Denver, and Los Angeles took a more social and political approach, looking at some of the talented men and women who were "painters of modern life," both Impressionists and realists, circa 1885–1915. "Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York" at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. abandoned the artificial connection of "The Eight," a grouping that linked artists as different as George Luks and Arthur Davies or John Sloan and Ernest Lawson, and also turned our attention away from native Impressionists like J. Alden Weir and Childe Hassam to six men who wanted no part of making raucous, gaudy, sweaty New York look like another version of London or Paris.

George Bellows, William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan may not always have demonstrated the facility of academic or neo-Impressionist stars on the order of William Merritt Chase or John Singer Sargent, but the point of this exhibition was that they had something even more important going for them: a connection to the life of their time, particularly (but not exclusively) its urban dimension, and an interest in providing that time with a symbolic focus—a "shock center"—in the form of the country's dominant metropolis. Yet (and this is the second and larger theme of the show) the well-wrought products of their experience of the city are not to be confused with Naturalist "social commentary," or any version of journalism-on-canvas. Individual temperament, far-ranging curiosity, an unfastidious sense of brushwork and space, and a love of brick, clutter, and city light played their part as well, though one would never know this from the histories and textbooks to date.

A valuable feature of the exhibition in arguing this position was the inclusion of "non-art" material or non-painterly art. Photographs, postcards, cartoons, sheet-music covers, and drawings from newspapers provide another perspective on the city—overlapping that of the painters in that it treats New York as a place of ferment, much as the painters did, but fundamentally different in that the means of expression necessarily transform the content, a basic truth that is rarely applied to these artists who have often been narrowly discussed as chroniclers and social critics. So the excruciating congestion of George Bellows' *New York, 1911* or the class issues in George Luks's depiction of sidewalk vendors in *Allen Street* (1905) are of less concern than the sheer *interest* these scenes evoke as moments of enlargement, engagement, color, and challenge. Alice Austen photographs a newsboy in 1906, and the grain of the photograph and its black-and-white color fix us in one kind of transcriptive reality; Luks paints *Widow McGee* (1902), and the brush-

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strokes and dark background land us in another—in which a bag lady has been treated to the Whistler effect. Robert Henri's *Portrait of Willie Gee* (1904) works in the same way: no overt commentary on racist America in this stately picture of an African-American boy, but an implicit comment on the rightful opening-up of the culture to new life along with a dazzling example of Henri's dark palette and robust brushwork. John Sloan's *The Haymarket* (1907) or *Three A.M.* (1909) command attention for the mysterious, recessed spaces they draw us toward—in one case, beyond the doorway and panes of glass to a tawdry bar, and in another, to the blue-green back wall of a Chelsea tenement—and not merely for the fact that American art has finally left Edith Wharton Land behind. Illustrators some of these artists may have been in their youth in the 1890s, but they had long since set their sights on a higher goal. In fact, one reason Everett Shinn appears a lesser artist in this company is that, for all his talent with pencil and pastel, he was the one of the group to have made the least clear-cut break with his start as a newspaper illustrator.

"Metropolitan Lives" had a healthy element of readjustment to it (revisionism somehow seems too strong a term), both in the show itself and in the excellent catalogue. Virginia Mecklenburg's essay "Manufacturing a Rebellion," for instance, treats the way in which the label of "daring social critic" has been overplayed and was somewhat calculated to begin with. This view in no way diminishes the achievement of Henri, Luks, Sloan, et al. On the contrary, it could be said to widen it, asking us to consider the Ashcan painters less as men self-consciously laboring to thwart the Genteel Tradition than as creators of a body of work that is more than the sum of its numerous departures from tradition. The distinction matters. This is one difference between, say, an Odets and an Ibsen, an Upton Sinclair and a Balzac, an Ed Kienholz and a Philip Evergood. Nothing fades over the years as definitively as the reputation of the rebel who existed to rile his conservative peers and whose story is purely one of resistance. His work never turns out to be so very shocking, anyway, and what do succeeding generations care about yesterday's battles? The individual who resisted *and* in the process forged something new, dynamic, quirky, and affirmative is the man to remember and learn from, and that definition surely applies to the best of the Ashcan school.

The vast (even daunting) Roy De Carava retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art was an interesting experience hot-on-the-heels of "Metropolitan Lives." In De Carava we have a talented photographer, a lifelong New Yorker who often looked to the city for his subject matter, an artist as far removed from the business of simply "recording" as Sloan or Luks were, and an exquisite stylist who is enamored of urban darkness and shadow as much as the Ashcan painters were of urban color. The 200 pictures on view last spring, covering the period 1949 to 1994, included portraits of Langston Hughes, Charlie Parker, Norman Lewis, Sarah Vaughan, and other black notables, quiet street scenes,

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homey interiors, and precise, formal still lifes. De Carava's roots as an African-American are obviously important (he was born in Harlem in 1919), but it is one of his achievements—made abundantly clear in this no-frills chronological exhibition—to have found a way to evoke simultaneously the personal and the universal, the socially specific and the philosophically large, or meditative. What this means is that at moments with De Carava we are studying "black America" through the eyes of a native—no Carl Van Vechten tourism here—and then just as quickly, sometimes while still looking at the same photograph, we can become lost in the contemplation of assorted objects on a table, the folds of a hat or a face, the sense of a day ending and time mercilessly passing. De Carava's city is his own creation, so to speak, saying as much about him and what he regards as important as it does about any alleged "objective" reality in Harlem's homes or on the streets downtown. This is the essence of artistry and vision. And for this photographer, whose black-and-white images yield almost nothing if seen on the run, the vehicle for that kind of sensibility is blackness in all its meanings: black skin and black families, black jazz and black struggle, fading sunlight, unlighted rooms, shadows that only intense scrutiny can penetrate, the blackness that connotes the need to peer and wonder.

Three other small exhibitions at the Modern this spring were worthy of note. "Abstraction, Pure and Impure" considered the varied directions geometric abstract painting has taken since the heady wartime days of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie.* If the urgency and excitement it inspires covered a wide range as well, from Frank Stella's magnetic *Astoria* (1953) to the anemia of Jo Baer's *Double Bar, Grey (Green Line)* (1968), the show made good use of works entirely from MoMA's collection and ably charted this lugubrious terrain. It was of interest to me how speedily most viewers went through these galleries the morning I was at the museum and how slowly the same people made their way through the rest of the building. (Robert Ryman—he of the endless series of all-white canvases—provided some unintentional humor in a catalogue statement that the important question for him has never been "*what* to paint, but only *how* to paint." This from a man whose spareness makes Ad Reinhardt and Tony Smith look like masters of clutter.) Of even more importance, though, was the adjoining show, again from the museum's own collection, "Deformations: Aspects of the Modern Grotesque." In a century lost to both pure tragedy and pure comedy, as Thomas Mann observed, the grotesque is apt to be the most "genuine style" of our age, and MoMA's holdings in Louis Eilshemius, Ivan Albright, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, James Ensor, Francis Bacon, Philip Guston, Lucas Samaras, and Cindy Sherman are all too rarely featured there in their proper historical and tortured company. A show that begins with a photograph of the Emperor Maximilian hardening in his open coffin is one that might present some obstacles to "mere" painters trying to be horrific, but that proved not to be the case.

Finally, the surprise treat in the form of a small, unannounced

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Brancusi show following the large Philadelphia retrospective was as good as museum-going gets. Combining works from its own collection with those on loan to Philadelphia last fall from the Musée National d'Arte Moderne, MoMA provided, in effect, its own version of "Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline." Turning away from the overpowering influence of Rodin, Brancusi reinvented his art form as thoroughly and majestically (and wittily) as Kandinsky transformed painting. It was all there at MoMA in a perfectly compact version of what was seen in the larger exhibition—the sleek abstracting of portraiture in *Mlle. Pogany*, the anti-academic "primitive" influence on Modernism in *The Chief*, the breaking down of the gap between the work and its base in the three-part sculptural structure that supports *Magic Bird*, the *hommage* to the past in the rigorously contemporary carving of *Socrates*, the rebuke to nineteenth-century bombast everywhere. An event both electrifying and elegiac: we are not apt to see so much inventiveness, confidence, manual skill, and intelligent humor again in our time.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

My Brontë Problem—and Yours?

FOR AT LEAST THE PAST TWO DECADES I HAVE READ very little by or about the Brontë sisters, have left their novels off course syllabi that regularly include Jane Austen and George Eliot, have even—when in England—continued to avoid a pilgrimage to Haworth and environs. The publication of Juliet Barker's massive compound biography of the family—for once, "magisterial" is an understatement—roused me from my dogmatic slumbers, as it became time to render some account of how much I'd been missing. Accordingly, over the past few months, I've reread *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, finally completed *Villette*, skimmed Charlotte's *The Professor*, got bogged down in *Shirley*, dipped, briefly, into Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Not enough to pass muster as a knowledgeable critic of the sisters' art, but enough to aid my navigation of Barker's biography, as well as a recent one on Charlotte Brontë by Lyndall Gordon.[1] This report on my experience is offered with the tentativeness of one who wonders whether his own difficulties in responding to the Brontës' novels with admiring pleasure—the way I respond to those of Austen and Eliot—is any more than another mark against my character as a critic and a human being. Richard Aldington wrote a book about D.H. Lawrence titled *Portrait of a Genius . . . But*; pluralizing the ascription and applying it to the genius of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, I would still want to underline *but*.

There are no buts about Juliet Barker's wholly confident, indeed mind-boggling, history of the family, from the Reverend Patrick Brontë's entry under the gateway of St. John's College, Cambridge in 1802 (he had originated in a thatched two-room peasant cabin in the parish of Drumballyroney in Ireland), to an evocation, on the book's final page, of the hundreds of thousands of Brontë enthusiasts who come yearly to tread the ground where "some of the greatest novels in the English language" were written. The biography's 800-plus pages of text is followed by a further 150 pages of notes, in extremely small typeface, providing the kind of minute documentation that only the serious Brontë scholar or fanatical fan could care about. A single instance of Ms. Barker's assertion and documentation of her endless parade of facts, facts, facts, is the following clarification of something not all of us were

[1] THE BRONTËS, by *Juliet Barker*. St. Martin's Press. $35.00. CHARLOTTE BRONTË: A Passionate Life, by *Lyndall Gordon*. W.W. Norton & Co. $27.50. THE LETTERS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË, Volume One, 1829–1847, ed. by *Margaret Smith*, Oxford University Press, $90.00, has also recently appeared.

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wondering about, the exact coloring of Anne Brontë's hair. Charlotte's friend and correspondent Ellen Nussey, in one of the first descriptions of the family on record, wrote that Anne's hair "was a very pretty light brown and in falling curls" but Barker quickly sets her straight, noting that "Anne's hair was actually darker than Ellen remembered: a little plait, cut off and carefully preserved by Patrick on 22 May 1833, suggests that it had deepened to a rich brown with a hint of auburn, though it remained fairer than her sisters'." This correction of Ellen Nussey's memory is occasion for the seventh chapter's eighty-ninth footnote, which reads as follows if you care to turn to p. 874: "Plait of AB hair, with PB autograph note, 22 May 1833: MS BS 171, BPM. Anne's hair had been fair as a baby, when Sarah Garrs cut off a lock in 1824: see above, p. 134." In other words, one has the feeling that Barker did not make it up out of whole cloth and that Ellen Nussey made a mistake. But something like a slight depression, attendant on the little item, descended on this reader.

It is surely admirable for a biographer to be relentless in pursuit of the Truth, but an important part of Barker's operation is her relentless trashing of Mrs. Gaskell, whose *Life of Charlotte Brontë* appeared two years after the subject's death, and has since become a classic, endlessly reprinted. Barker calls Elizabeth Gaskell's book a "wonderfully evocative picture," but her own biography seems to be animated by taking one smack after another at Gaskell's unreliability. Some of the smacks are harmless enough: Mrs. Gaskell's description of a Yorkshire landscape as "desolate and wild, great tracts of bleak land" comes out of her living on "the softer side of the Pennines" and so never being attracted to the wilder Yorkshire landscape; so she "disdained" the open moorland around the village of Thornton. Gaskell's amusing story about how a predecessor of Patrick Brontë's was persecuted by his congregation is "completely untrue, as are her sensational stories about Patrick's 'eccentricities'." In assuming, because of all those written pages in the Brontës' junvenilia (the Angria and Gondal sagas), that the children's interests were sedentary and intellectual, Mrs. Gaskell falls into a "trap"; while statistics on liquor sales at Haworth pubs belie "the picture of drunkenness" found in her pages. Even though Patrick tried hard to prevent Charlotte's marrying his curate, Arthur Bell Nichols, Gaskell's negative opinion of the father's heavy hand is described as "poisoned" by gossip, and Gaskell confused the Brontës' life and work by making their lives "an excuse for their works." Even on Barker's final page Gaskell is still there, as the new biographer concedes, magnanimously, "For all her faults, Mrs. Gaskell at least ensured that the lives of the Brontës would be ... perennially fascinating." There is a meanmindedness about all this that stuck in my craw, especially since I would rather read Mrs. Gaskell than her humorless corrector.

Juliet Barker obviously subscribes to the belief that if you get in all the facts and get them right, and if your subject—the Brontë Family Fortunes—is interesting enough, then all you have to do is keep on

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writing without worrying overmuch about the quality of individual sentences. So she gives us in detail the dress code at Cowan Bridge School (Charlotte would make the school into Jane Eyre's Lowood), or a full-fledged treatment of the ecclesiastical controversies and difficulties in Patrick's parish, or a fully-detailed topography/geography of—it sometimes feels like—every village in Yorkshire. The same thoroughness obtains when the places are imaginary ones, like those of the Angria and Gondal sagas the young people concocted on winter nights at the parsonage. We are told, at truly mesmerizing lengths, the plots of these different stories—no matter that they are extremely tedious, at least to one not in on the writing of them. (One of the salutary remarks in Lyndall Gordon's life of Charlotte, is Gordon's admission that these juvenilia are "no less boring" for their being "so voluminous.")

In the course of all this information-conveying, Barker writes sentences that made me shake by head in disbelief, as this in reference to Charlotte and Emily's employment at Roe Head School (where Emily lasted only a short time): "If Charlotte felt the need for privacy, how much more must Emily have done so when she had to share even her bed with one of her fellow pupils?" Yes, how much more. There is an odd if-then sequence about Charlotte's refusal of a marriage proposal by Ellen Nussey's brother: "If the character of St. John Rivers [in *Jane Eyre*] is also drawn from that of Henry Nussey, then Charlotte was indeed wise not to marry him." Sometimes these very strange young women are presented in such garden-variety terms that the result sounds ludicrous: "Though Charlotte was clearly an awkward person to deal with, she had much to put up with in her role as governess." Assuredly so, but calling her "awkward to deal with" is equivalent to opining, as a student did recently in my presence, that Emily Dickinson was "lonely, wasn't she?" When Branwell Brontë, about to set out for new job in the morning, overindulges himself in "a riotous drinking session" the night before, Barker finds it "instructive" that this relatively sheltered young man "could indulge in . . . the occasional binge just like any other young man of his age." Why is it instructive? And why are we treated to the instruction that Branwell "probably exaggerated the amount he had drunk as he is unlikely to have wished to travel the last tortuous twenty miles of the mountainous southern Lakeland road between Kendal and Ulverston in a stagecoach with a hangover"? Tell that to anyone who has persisted in tying one on even as tomorrow's important prospect loomed. As this long book nears its completion, the writer seems fatigued, to the point of just grabbing for the nearest cliché: "Had it not been for the increasingly difficult and unhappy situation at Haworth, Charlotte could well have rested on her laurels and got on with her life." Resting on your laurels is pretty bad, but only on the soap opera I watch do characters try to get on with their lives. When Charlotte decides to marry the curate, despite her father's objections, we are told that she "would fight tooth and nail for the right to a chance of happiness." Mrs. Gaskell—always the target for patronizing—is described as "her roman-

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tic heart all aquiver with sympathy for the thwarted lovers," and as "all agog" about her own part in the outcome. Such writing cheapens, rather than explores experience.

At any rate, no one will ever need to do this sort of job on the Brontës again. Meanwhile, from a perspective more literary and more critical, Lyndall Gordon—who has written sensitively about T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf—has given us an excellent biographical study of Charlotte. Unlike Barker, Gordon pays handsome tribute to Mrs. Gaskell's book—"the rare conjunction of a moving and eloquent storyteller with a great subject of whom she had first hand knowledge." Gordon's book is subtitled "A Passionate Life" and its emphasis throughout is on Charlotte Brontë's search for a voice adequate to express the fiery spirit within. More than one contemporary of Charlotte's resorted to the fire metaphor. George Eliot, as well as George Henry Lewes, found it in the novels ("What passion, what fire within her," said Eliot) and Thackeray, who made the mistake of introducing Charlotte—at the party he gave for her at his Kensington home in 1849—as Currer Bell, was told off by C.B. in no uncertain terms: "I believe there are books being published by a person named Currer Bell, but the person you address is Miss Brontë—and I see no connection between the two." At that diner party, she refused to be drawn out by the other guests, eventually retiring to the dimmest corner of the study, not even deigning to speak with Jane Carlyle. Of course the Brontës never set up as ideal guests for a good social evening. During their sojourn in Brussels, when Charlotte and Emily were invited to the British embassy by a clergyman and his wife, Emily confined herself to the "occasional monosyllable" while "Charlotte's habit was to wheel round in her chair so as almost to conceal her face from the person who addressed her." At any rate, Thackeray refused to put up with it: "There's a fire and fury raging in that little woman, a rage scorching her heart which doesn't suit me," said he, and one can see his point, indefatigable clubman that he was.

But Thackeray strongly admired *Jane Eyre*, admitting that it interested him so much he lost (or gained) a whole day in reading it, even as his printers were waiting for copy. And the feeling was mutual, since Charlotte admired Thackeray more than any other contemporary fictionist and dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to him. But after Thackeray's dinner party their relationship cooled. Barker is eager to blame Thackeray—at least as much as Charlotte—for inviting guests who were "society women, mere dabblers in the world of literature" and whose "interests and lives had nothing in common with her own." But the Carlyles were there, as was the poet Adelaide Proctor, along with a female novelist or two: how bad could it have been? Where indeed could poor Thackeray have found guests whose lives had something in common with Charlotte's own? Surely a tall order. At any rate the fire raging within the little woman didn't burn itself out, and Thackeray backed off, calling *Villette*, when it was published, "a plaguy book" whose heroine he didn't like (though he called the novel "clever"). My own

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hunch on the evidence of these biographies is that Charlotte was in a fair way to being an impossible person, certainly in the social arena, whether earlier in Brussels or at the time of her fame in London.

Perhaps the best formulation of why she had to be "impossible" and couldn't be chums with Thackeray for long is made by Lyndall Gordon in her discussion of the painful end of correspondence between Brontë and M. Heger, the Brussels schoolmaster under whose powerful influence she fell. Monsieur eventually put an end to that correspondence, devastating Charlotte. In one of her poems, she wrote:

> Devoid of charm, how could I hope
> My unasked love would e'er return?
> What hope, what influence lit the flame
> I still feel inly, deeply burn?

Gordon wants to "unlock desire from sexuality" and to see desire rather as "a longing for something as yet unformulated, which is other, and more, than what is available." She speaks tellingly of "Charlotte's particular desire for a voice in whose presence her own might rise." That "voice"—or the longing for it—was, Gordon says, her life, and remained so until near the end of it when she married the curate Arthur Nichols, stopped writing, and, having become pregnant, died three weeks before her thirty-ninth birthday.[2]

More than Barker, Gordon makes us care about and admire the unstoppable will in this fiery soul and the cruelly unfair way in which it burnt itself out so soon after entering into the new life of marriage. I am a good deal more doubtful about how useful or newly convincing are the fairly full treatments she gives to Charlotte Brontë's novels. There is of course no reason to demand that a biographer provide fresh critical insight into the art of her subject, but it's always a nice bonus when it happens. (Juliet Barker doesn't pretend to be a literary critic, and limits her commentary on the novels to factual matters, reception and reviews and the like.) But Lyndall Gordon is a sensitive reader and, as demonstrated in her analysis of Charlotte's character, a good psychologist. I was somewhat disappointed then, as a reader always looking for a new way to think about *Jane Eyre*, not to find her analysis repaying. My main problem with her way of talking about the novel—which is to see the novel as a "progression" by which the heroine moves through various barriers and oppressions to a married equality with the "new" Mr. Rochester—is that the discussion is conducted too much in terms of what "Jane" must do to get where she wants to be. For example:

[2] Barker reports that the attendant surgeon called this progressive wasting disease "Phthisis." Gordon speculates that it may have been Addison's disease, but was more likely a deadly infection of the digestive tract. (Charlotte could have caught it from her recently deceased servant, Tabby.) At any rate her pregnancy doesn't seem to have been the cause of her death.

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> The pioneer of a new Progress must break through the encrustations of language, lover's and religious cant, to see, or *see* in the sense of revelation, the destructive self-interest of persons in positions of power. As Christian once did battle with Obstinate or the Giant Despair, so Jane must outface the deceptive faces of nineteenth century Benevolence.

And on, in this manner, as if Jane were somehow independent of her creator, and as if all these "breakthroughs" can only be seen in an admirably positive light, since we are sympathically attuned to the condition of women in nineteenth-century England.

Gordon thinks she has a more enlightened way to understand *Jane Eyre* than earlier critics, remarking that back there "in the mid twentieth century" it was common to read the novel as an expression of gender antagonisms and to point to Rochester's physical blindness as "emasculation." But her own way of conceiving Rochester may be at least as simplistic: "He is the educable man. Though blinded in the fire that destroys his wife, he can learn to 'see' his true mate who is not to be his grateful dependent but his equal." She announces, without, it seems to me, enough of an ironic sense, that "Jane Eyre will not settle for anything beyond or less than a transformed Rochester." To which one might reply: I'll say! Gordon seems unconcerned with or unaware of the violent energy that accompanies our heroine's rise from inferiority to superiority—superiority over everything and everybody. No half measures can be brooked by the novelist, who is also the first-person narrator lifted up into triumph. As G. Armour Craig said (back in the mid-twentieth century in an essay I've never seen answered), "The movement of this novel is literally transcendence with a vengeance"; society, other people, the world outside the mind, are reduced neatly to one mind's desires. Craig concludes his essay with a brilliant formulation: "The power of the 'I' of this novel is secret, undisclosable, absolute. There are no terms to explain its dominance, because no terms can appear which are not under its dominance."[3] There is a sense in which, among other things, *Jane Eyre* is a kind of metaphysical joke, accomplished by the novelist's sleight-of-hand. This isn't to say that the novel is any less readable, compulsively so, than generations of readers have found it to be; but it may speak to Leslie Stephen's question in his essay on Charlotte Brontë in *Hours in a Library*; "Why is the charm so powerful and why is it so limited?"

The charm is likely more powerful for female than for male readers of *Jane Eyre* and of Brontë's other novels, especially her last one, *Villette.* Composed when she was periodically depressed, all her siblings dead, the Reverend Patrick to be looked after, it's no wonder that she

[3] G. Armour Craig, "The Unpoetic Compromise," in *Self and Society in the English Novel,* ed. by Mark Schorer (1956).

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produced her gloomiest and some would say deepest piece of fiction. Strong claims have been made for *Villette*, in recent years, to be in fact Charlotte's great work, more densely explorative of the female imagination and voice than even *Jane Eyre*. Q.D. Leavis' passionate account of the novel as embodying the final expression of the impulses that made Brontë a novelist, a work "almost preternatural in its power," is an account one must take seriously (as one takes anything Leavis wrote). Gilbert and Gubar give it a long chapter in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, terming it "perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written." Strong claims, but no stronger than Matthew Arnold's response to it in an 1853 letter to Clough: "Miss Brontë has written a hideous undelightful convoluted constricted novel . . . one of the most utterly disagreeable books I ever read" (An opinion only confirmed by his seeing the physical Charlotte as entirely "a fire without aliment"). Of course no one reveres Arnold as a critic of fiction, or perhaps of women, but—as I slowly, tortuously made my way through *Villette*—the word "undelightful" or something like it came more than once to mind.

How much does this have to do with intransigent males like me and Matthew Arnold and Thackeray being unable and unequipped to sense the greatness of a fierce work? My only appeal is to the reader who, while impressed by the symbolic organization of *Villette* (Leavis is good on how the England-Brussels cultures are played off against each other), and the undeniable inwardness Brontë expresses through her heroine, Lucy Snowe, still runs up against something rebarbative in the actual writing of the book. Q.D. Leavis insists, without qualification, that Brontë is "a great prose-writer," but her analysis of *Villette* is conducted in almost total independence of its particular sentences and paragraphs. I mean the sort of writing that happens when, fairly late in the book, M. Paul Emanuel—the schoolmaster figure who stands in for the real life M. Heger—suggests to Lucy that at the next public examination she improvise a composition in French. This prospect throws our heroine into a tizzy:

> I knew what the result of such an experiment would be. I, to whom nature had denied the impromptu faculty; who, in public, was by nature a cypher; whose time and mental activity, even when alone, was not under the meridean sun; who needed the fresh silence of morning, or the recluse peace of evening, to win from the Creative Impulse one evidence of his presence, one proof of his force: I, with whom that Impulse was the most intractable, the most capricious, the most maddening of masters (him before me always excepted)—a deity which sometimes, under circumstances, apparently propitious, would not speak when questioned, would not hear when appealed to, would not, when sought, be found: but would stand, all cold, all indurated, all granite, a dark Baal with carven lips and blank eyeballs . . .

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I could go on—Lucy Snowe certainly does—but submit that "a great prose-writer" is not the right name for the author of these sentences, and that they are not untypical of much in *Villette* about whose prose Arnold's word "constricted" is a mild characterization.

My Brontë problem probably comes to no more—no less—than that: that too often, in her final novel especially, the surface of Charlotte Brontë's prose impedes rather than encourages the kinds of satisfactions I regularly get from Austen, Dickens, Trollope, the Thackeray of *Vanity Fair*, George Eliot, Henry James, Hardy. It's clear from the number of recent considerations of *Villette*, that its appeal is that of a "deep" text, whose properties and strategies may be rewardingly probed—and the academy is busy at such probing.[4] With that other deep text, *Wuthering Heights*, proliferating critical commentary has been an important part of its continuing life: indeed Frank Kermode treats it as, by virtue of number and plurality of interpretations it has received, a classic text. But however "problematic" Emily Brontë's novel has been felt to be (and I for one have no "interpretation" of it to offer), no one ever suggested that, page by page, paragraph by paragraph, it was not dazzlingly readable. The mode may be high theatrical, as in the arias sung by Heathcliff and Cathy; or delicate-poetical observations about natural life on the moors; or realistic (rich detail of specification and localization); or knockabout violence with a farcical component—Lockwood doused with ice water to cure his bloody nose or Heathcliff covering Edgar Linton with a tureen of hot applesauce. I don't know how often it's been remarked that there's a likely connection between the variety of these styles and literary modes in *Wuthering Heights*, and its absence of a central commentator—in first or third person—who can be felt to emanate from Emily Brontë. In other words, for all the heated "passion" in its pages, *Wuthering Heights* has the quality of impersonality, even of coldness, that makes for something beyond what Charlotte's fierce but always *interested* spirit managed to achieve.

[4] An extremely interesting recent critical example is *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct*, by Janet Gezari (Philadelphia, 1992). Gezari has also edited Emily Brontë's complete poems (New York, 1992).

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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

Banqueting on Facts

THE BAD NEWS IS THAT WE ARE BESIEGED BY FACTOIDS. The good news? Not much, unless that the siege testifies to a salutary hunger for facts. That's old news, of course—the hunger, if not the siege. Aristotle told us that human beings really like learning things—not just the philosophers among us, but all of us in our degree. And it's true. We watch television, and find facts amid the foolishness; we find them in *People* or *Harper's*, *U.S. News* or the *New York Times*; we make ourselves encyclopedias of sports statistics or Köchel numbers; we soak ourselves in the Civil War, or search out our genealogies to the remotest putative king. However often we are assured that the data base has replaced memory, that it's not how much you know but how well you can think, that the educated person can look things up, we keep on wanting to *know* things. Though our cybertechnical fingers can access for us a worldwide web of true-or-false, we still suspect that an empty head has a hard time thinking, even with electronic assistance, and that we think more, and better, when we carry in our heads a stock of things to think about.

So I record with satisfaction that Marina Warner has written another book for people who luxuriate in the variety and fertility of facts. Those who've read her book on the cult of the Blessed Virgin[1] have already experienced the extraordinary cross-disciplinary range of her scholarship. There her awareness of fact stretches—and stretches us—in time and space from a stable in Palestine to divine babies in India, Mexico, and the Ivory Coast, from Ishtar in the Gilgamesh epic to contemporary redefinitions of feminine value. *From the Beast to the Blonde*[2] is written with the same richness of reference.

Did you know that in Britain an offering of pubic hair could keep the devil at bay? That there are 35,000 collectors of teddy bears in America alone? That the first unsuccessful attempt to get a woman into the French Academy was made as early as 1650, and by a man? That in 1800 in Lower Burgundy a woman's life expectancy averaged twenty-five years? That in post-Revolutionary France, a widow had no right to the keys to the house in which she had lived with her husband? Are you aware of what St. Augustine thought of beards?

To approach more directly to Warner's current subject, did you know that Goldilocks wasn't always Goldilocks, that she started out as an old

[1] *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, 1976).

[2] FROM THE BEAST TO THE BLONDE: Fairy Tales and Their Tellers, by *Marina Warner*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $35.00.

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woman? That until the Brothers Grimm got hold of her, Snow White's wicked stepmother wasn't her stepmother at all, but her natural mother? That nineteenth-century retellings of *Hansel and Gretel* alter the stories to absolve the children's father of blame? That the earliest known version of *Cinderella*—lost slipper, stepfamily—was first written down in the ninth century, in Chinese?

One could read *From the Beast to the Blonde* like Jack Horner, picking out the plums, which (this is hardly an exaggeration) are to be found on virtually every page. With equal pleasure, and a little more sequentially, one could chase the transmutations of favorite stories in space and time. If Cinderella started out Chinese, Beauty and the Beast, Warner shows us, first came to literary attention as Cupid and Psyche in *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius. That's certainly nice to know.

But of course I'm overdoing this matter of fact. I do know there are better satisfactions, and I wouldn't be reviewing this book if it didn't offer them. Certainly I like facts. I deplore the galloping de-emphasis of factual knowledge in the humanities, where (to cite only my own institution) survey courses in literature have almost disappeared, and actual examinations of what students remember—the kind they can fail—have become a rarity. It's fun for an antic dinosaur to try a factual pirouette among the nimble theorists (who also, when the chips are down, don't really mean all they say). Yet the nimble theorists have taught us something we used to be able to forget. They have deprived us for good of the naive belief that facts speak for themselves. No fact is innocent; the simplest date is weighted with the baggage of its time and place, with the cultural assumptions and attributed significances of those who transmitted it to us, to discover in it significances of our own.

Warner's book, then, is far more than a florilegium of facts. Fascinating as they are, each of those I've cited, amid thousands more, serves as an invitation to thought—*food* for thought, in the pregnant old phrase—as she associates it to other facts, contextualizes it historically and culturally, and uses the assemblage to enable and support the powerful and original argument that makes this monumental work of scholarship not merely fascinating but an important contribution to social and intellectual history. Fairy tales are more, much more than stories we tell, or allow others to tell, our children. They lie deep in our own consciousness, our first encounters with narrative. From Red Riding Hood to Superman (for Warner's definition of fairy tale, or as she sometimes calls it, the wonder tale, is broad and comprehensive) they shape our expectations and understanding of the situations and the human agents in the world around us. So it is no small thing that no one who reads Warner's book will be able to think about fairy tales in the same way again.

Of course there has already been a lot of serious thinking about fairy tales, most of it cited either in Warner's text or in the ten columns of very small print that make up her bibliography. Warner draws on it, but she is anything but overwhelmed by it. Far from being a development of Vladimir Propp's theory of archetypal plots or the psychoanalytic (and

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also archetypal) approach of Bruno Bettelheim, *From the Beast to the Blonde* marshals encyclopedic learning into a comprehensive challenge to those who have thought about fairy tales before her, as well as the much larger number of those who have not thought about them at all.

The thesis she sets out to establish is that "fairy tale's historical realism has been obscured," and that this in turn obscures their meanings and importance. Fairy tales are subversive. Because they are only fairy tales, they can attack received ideas. "Monsters turn out to be handsome young princes, beggars princesses, ugly old women powerful and benevolent fairies." They can "champion lost causes, the runts of the litter, the slow-witted and the malformed." They can "feel out the rules: the forbidden door opens on to *terra nova* where different rules may apply." The mood of fairy tales is one of "heroic optimism"; "they offer a rare and rich testimony to a sophisticated chronicle of wrongs and ways to evade or right them."

The tales, with their wide geographic dispersion, hold out an invitation to those in search of timeless patterns.

> Red Riding Hood or Snow White have become rich symbols for psychoanalysts to gloss. But the thrust towards universal significance has obscured the genre's equal powers to illuminate experience embedded in social and material conditions, . . . in the laws of dowry, land tenure, feudal obedience, domestic hierarchies and marital dispositions.

Fairy tales are immemorial. But they are not always the same, nor do they carry the same meanings. And this fact—yes, fact—which Warner establishes in incontrovertible detail, leads beyond factuality into—where else?—the realm of value. The tales change; more, they are about changing. "Shape-shifting is one of fairy tale's dominant and characteristic wonders. More so than the presence of fairies, the moral function, the imagined antiquity and oral anonymity of the ultimate source, and the happy ending . . . metamorphosis defines the fairy tale." This is more than a scholar's informed definition. "When I was young and robust," writes Warner in her introduction, "I still felt great hunger for fairy tales; they seemed to offer the possibility of change, far beyond the boundaries of their improbable plots or fantastically illustrated pages. The metamorphoses promised more of the same, not only in fairy land, but in this world." Warner is still robust, convinced that since social and material conditions can change, and do, they are "ultimately more capable of redress than the universal lessons of greed, lust and cruelty which fairy tales give us; . . . the historical interpretation of fairy tale holds out more hope to the listener or the reader" than approaches which treat them, or their components, as entities outside time.

There is much to be redressed. Warner hardly bothers to identify herself as a feminist, but girls, women, and their children are at the center of her concerns, and, she shows us, the concerns of these stories—tales told overwhelmingly by women, from all levels of society,

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whether by Mother Goose or other "old wives" or by aristocratic ladies at the court of Louis Quatorze. All those forced marriages, murdered wives, abandoned children—because we have ignored, been ignorant of the circumstances of their historicity, we have not recognized the profound subversiveness of fairy tales. Nor could we have done so, knowing them in the softened, made-for-children recensions in which they have come down to us. But Warner tells us a host of facts we didn't know, about the old wives, and about those *précieuses* Molière found so *ridicules*. It had not occurred to us that the fairy tales of Mme. d'Aulnoy, Mlle. L'Héritier, and other equally unfamiliar authors represent "the fiery protest of a whole generation of French noblewomen against the serfdom of dynastic matrimony." Is it any wonder that in the tales they told, tales they had heard from their nurses and servants, "women's power is very marked," that in them "open, partisan claims" are made on women's behalf?

Gender matters in the analyst of the tale as well as in its teller. When Propp analyzed the wonder tale into seven spheres of action and gave each its archetypal functionary, six came singly: hero, villain, donor, helper, dispatcher, false hero. Not so the seventh, the princess and her father. These two, he wrote, "cannot be exactly delineated from each other." Which seems unexceptionable enough. Once upon a time there was a princess, whose father promised her to .... Unexceptionable, until Warner makes us think about it. Princess and father, functions inseparable. Propp's delineation "disclos[es], unwittingly, the strictly patriarchal character of the traditional marriage plots, ... the dynamic of the contrast made according to [the princess's] father's wish." A simple matter of formal classification "reproduces the weight of male power in the wonder tale." "Unwittingly," as Warner quietly points out. "Inadvertently." As we've been told by many nimble theorists, it matters who's talking.

Clustering fact upon fact, Warner convinces us to take these tales as seriously as she does, insisting that "the experiences these stories recount are remembered, lived experiences of women, not fairytale concoctions from the depths of the psyche"; that "they are rooted in the social, legal and economic history of marriage and the family," with "all the stark actuality of the real and the power real life has to bite into the psyche and etch its design. ..."

Ahistorical thinking can do harm, and the harm is not just intellectual. It is real harm to real human beings.

> When history falls away from a subject, we are left with Otherness, and all its power to compact enmity, recharge it and recirculate it. An archetype is a hollow thing, but a dangerous one, a figure or image which through usage has been uncoupled from the circumstances which brought it into being, and goes on spreading false consciousness.

Consider the wicked stepmother. Disney made her the stuff of nightmares, "towering, taloned, raven-haired," stalking her prey. "In our

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times, bad women come in the form of (step)mothers." Warner places her parentheses carefully. Bettelheim is responsible for these. She quotes him at length on the double aspect of the Mother who "suddenly change[s] into 'a look-alike impostor.'" Fairy tales, he wrote, "permit the child not to be destroyed by this 'impostor'"; perceiving her as a stepmother, the child can be "really angry" without feeling guilt. In the twentieth century, the century that gave us "the schizophrenogenic mother,"

> the bad mother has become an inevitable, even required ingredient in fantasy, and hatred of her a legitimate, applauded stratagem of psychic survival. Bettelheim's theory [and, I must add, it was not only Bettelheim's] has contributed to the continuing absence of good mothers from fairy tales in all kinds of media, and to a dangerous degree which itself mirrors current prejudices and reinforces them. His argument, and its tremendous diffusion and widespread acceptance, have effaced from memory the historical reasons for women's cruelty within the home and have made such behavior seem natural, even intrinsic to the mother-child relationship. It has even helped to ratify the expectation of [mother-child] strife as healthy and the resulting hatred as therapeutic.

This will not seem extreme to those who recall one fact Warner missed; the life-size statue of Mother that Bettelheim installed at his Orthogenic School, for the children to kick and pummel in the interest of their psychic rehabilitation. Real stepmothers, like real mothers, pay the price of what Warner calls "the twentieth century's appetite for maternal violence," as they "tackl[e] a hard crust of bigotry set in the minds of their new children, and refreshed by endless returns of the wicked stepmother in the literature of childhood." They would be better off contending with the facts.

Yet do these facts, past and present, fit together as smoothly as all that? After all, it was women, mostly, who told these tales, though as time went on it was mostly men who collected them and wrote them down. Yet "figures of female evil stride through the best-loved, classic fairy tales: on this earth, wicked stepmothers, ugly sisters; from fairyland, bad fairies, witches, ogresses. . . . All over the world, stories which centre on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering." How to explain *this* fact—or explain it away?

It is too simple, writes Warner, "to pin the picture of female hatred and cruelty on male authors and interpreters alone." The male preservers of fairy stories, from Charles Perrault to the Grimm Brothers and "their brilliantly successful spiritual heir Walt Disney," contributed to the threatening image and confirmed it; Disney's *Snow White* and *Cinderella* "have done more than any other creation to naturalize female—maternal—malignancy in the imaginations of children worldwide." But the stories came overwhelmingly from women. Thirty-six of

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the Grimms' tales came from Wilhelm Grimm's mother-in-law; his sisters-in-law provided more than sixty. What power has history to attenuate—or extenuate—misogyny from a female source?

It has a good deal. Read with a fine historical imagination, these "vehicles of the grimmest realism" point not to female self-hatred, the easy psychological explanation, but to the actual facts of material and social conditions. Golden-haired Rapunzel, held captive in a tower by an old witch, takes her name from the savory herb her mother craved so much that she gave the witch her baby in exchange. A fantastic, ugly story. But "the more one knows fairy tales the less fantastical they appear." Stephen Sondheim's 1988 musical, *Into the Woods*, puts forward another psychological reading, "assum[ing] the possessiveness of a perverted mother-love between witch and captive." But "a more historically based view would see that the old woman's desire for the baby girl corresponds to material needs for helping hands at home," reflecting a common medieval and early modern practice, the "transfer of girls to other families as prospective wives, or surrogate domestic servants." "Her furious intervention between the girl and her suitor would then relate the . . . fears of redundancy growing in a widowed woman whose son's marriage has made her insecure in what used to be her home."

There were cruel reasons for women's cruelty. The evil done by the (step)mother or witch arises not from the Oedipal configurations of the psyche, but "from the insecurity of her interests in a social and legal context"; it reflects "the difficulty of women making common cause within existing matrimonial arrangements." If we think of the stories from the point of view of a female narrator, herself aging, a nurse, a widowed granny, a superfluous aunt, "the kind of woman who threatens society by her singleness and her dependency," we may perceive how such themes could emerge. "The targets of narrative hatred"—witch, stepmother, malevolent fairy—"fit in with the economy of family life." The "old wives" speak for themselves. Recognize that, and "you can hear vibrating in them the tensions, the insecurity, jealousy and rage of both mothers-in-law against their daughters-in-law and vice versa," household divisions exacerbated by "the economic dependence of wives and mothers on the male breadwinner."

Tellers tell in history, and that guarantees change of emphasis and effect. Warner traces "the process by which the Grimms," in the first half of the nineteenth century, "gradually made their heroines more polite, well-spoken, or even silent, from one edition to the next, while their wicked female characters become more and more vituperative and articulate." But "tales of plucky or disaffected young women who baulk their suitors, defy their parents or guardians and generally offer opposition to their lot" are softened or set aside.

The tales of the learned ladies of the Sun King's France were not soft, and their folk originals could be harsher still. Beauty's Beast was a true beast; wild animals were not, as today, precious relics in a vanishing wilderness, but dangerous, terrifying. Today the point is that he's really good, and Beauty must show her sensitivity by perceiving it. Cocteau's

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film is wonderful, but note: "*he* does not have to change at all; *she* has to see past his unsightliness to the gentle and loving human being trapped inside." "Figures like the Beast bridegroom"—or King Kong—become more and more sympathetic, while "the danger of women become[s] more and more part of the story."

But beasts have not always been warm, fuzzy toys for toddlers (this is where Warner's teddy facts come in). The earlier versions of Beauty and the Beast, and there were many, spoke to an audience, mainly female, "who fully expected to be given away by their fathers," as Beauty was, "to men who might well strike them as monsters." When one has absorbed the facts which Warner provides, her comment seems neither tendentious nor speculative, but fully believable.

This was not an audience of children, though it might include them. It was only later that fairy tales began to be confined to the nursery, with predictable results. Nineteenth-century heroines become quieter and more polite, proper models for little girls, and ideals for little boys. Happy endings become commoner, then mandatory. The fur of beasts turns to unthreatening fuzz. (Warner's two chapters on "The Language of Hair" are among her most fascinating; Beast and Blonde are linked to Nature by their hairiness, though in different, gender-specific ways.) Savage themes are gentled or eliminated. One can see why Victorian editors dropped the once popular tale of Donkeyskin—*Peau d'Ane*—from Perrault's collection. Even with a happy ending (Perrault himself supplied one) it wouldn't do for Disney. A king's wife dies, having made him swear he would never marry again unless he finds a woman more beautiful than she. He searches, but only one woman meets the condition, his daughter. She demurs, he insists, she flees, disguises herself in the stinking skin of a donkey. There's much more to it, including a fairy godmother and a prince, even a reconciliation with the father, but it remains a vision of incestuous rape which takes the breath away, censored not because it is implausible but because it is all too plausible, because such things "could actually happen, and [are] known to have done so." Freud too censored; recounting the case of the "hysteric" Aurelia in 1895, he "purposely changed her molester from her father to her uncle." Later, telling his own fairy tales, he would find reason to convert the reality of her experience into illusion.

Summary sharpens the edges of an argument. I am conscious that mine has done so, has done justice neither to Warner's careful qualifications, nor to the rich circumstantiality that underlies its bolder speculations. Worse, I have not conveyed the imaginative sympathy that warms her account even of texts that repel by their harshness or misogyny. (And not only texts—twenty-four color plates and many more black-and-white illustrations support her argument.) There is much, much more in this rewarding book than I have been able to suggest. I haven't even mentioned the Sybil, or the Queen of Sheba's foot, or St. Dympna, whose flight from her incestuous father so incensed him that he had her beheaded. Warner gives us a feast of fact, in the service of original interpretation and new understanding.

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TOM WILHELMUS

Between Cultures

IN HIS 1971 BOOK *EXTRATERRITORIAL*, GEORGE STEINER ARGUED that bilingualism or multilingualism, or at least the sense of being between cultures and identities was a defining characteristic of great writers in the modern era. Kafka, Conrad, James, and Nabokov, the American expatriates as well as the "Anglo-Irish relation" in Joyce, Beckett, and Wilde were, he observed, examples of this phenomenon. Growth, personal development, the right to observe and to state an opinion—all required enlarged sensibilities made larger still by an awareness of possibilities not one's own (the classic example is that Stephen Dedalus had to go to Paris to discover how to write the uncreated conscience of the Irish race). Since we, in the nineties, appear to resist this multicultural perspective and seem to have collapsed into a patchwork of tribal self-interests, it may be useful to remind ourselves that openness to a trans-national and trans-ethnic experience has, from the Renaissance, been at the heart of Western aesthetic values.

To say that Salman Rushdie's new novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*,[1] for example, is great because it celebrates a multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic perspective (without being victimized by it however) seems almost guaranteed to produce controversy today. We want to support the author to be sure, but it seems unclear whether our support is justified because diversity deserves to be celebrated—i.e., because of his art—or because there is a *fatwa* against him. The same uncompromisingly global insight for which we might have praised Joyce seventy-five years ago, has become untenable as a mark of excellence in our time. The Ayatollah Khomeini has conspired with the spirit of ethnic self-interest to make it nearly impossible to read Rushdie except as a political and religious hard case. Even his own ethnic surname appears to have betrayed him. Would another British citizen who had written a book called *The Satanic Verses* and whose name was Smith, for example, have been the subject of a *fatwa*? And would his novel have been read, by readers both East and West, as an attack on Islam or, for what it more probably is, a post-modernist fantasy worthy of Nabokov or Pynchon?

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie returns to his roots, and to the setting of his first novel, *Midnight's Children*, writing a family chronicle placed in Bombay and documenting its ethnically and religiously diverse populations and its irrational twentieth-century political history: "In Bombay,

[1] THE MOOR'S LAST SIGH, by *Salman Rushdie*. Pantheon. $25.00.

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too, all-India met what-was-not-India. . . . all rivers flowed into its human sea. It was an ocean of stories . . . and everybody talked at once." Rushdie explores this ocean through the personal and family history of Moraes Zogoiby, the "Moor," who is the novel's narrator.

Of mixed Indian, Portuguese, and Jewish blood, Zogoiby is the scion of a rich family of spice merchants who trace their roots back to the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama but in whom are represented all the strands of Bombay's rich, redolent, violent, and diverse past. A multilingual punster, he is also burdened with all the guilt and self-loathing this history contains. In the course of the narrative, he weaves an ironic tale, antic and absurd, one that is obviously an expression of Rushdie's own stake in the situation: Zogoiby recounts his tale from a virtual prison in the West while under a death sentence imposed by one of his mother's rejected lovers.

The question we must ask ourselves is whether Rushdie's treatment of this subject matter is merely personal or whether it enriches and humanizes us all. The themes he engages are familiar ones from a traditional humanist's perspective: in the race between the need to accept and celebrate life's complexity and diversity and the opposing need to isolate, separate, and condemn everyone's group but one's own, the outcome, like the dance of Shiva, is simultaneously creative and destructive. Art, which is Rushdie's answer to all ayatollahs, is superior to religion because it is not insular. It bears witness to the whole range of human possibilities, promotes tolerance and self-discovery, and allows us to imagine a better, more inclusive future for everyone. As an artist, the Moor himself may be like Sheherazade, writing simply to stay alive, but within this context he would "rather die fighting over great poets than over gods." Moreover, his mother Aurora Zogoiby, a painter, provides an even richer insight into the artist's character as she contends with and opposes the social and political forces of modern India. Aurora, who is one of the most fascinating women in recent literature, fights, struggles, manipulates, dominates, abuses; but her paintings include the fullest expression of the ultimate message in the novel:

> In one or two canvases you saw, on the horizon, the protrusion of a flag-waving lance; but for the most part, during my childhood, Aurora Zogoiby was seeking to paint a golden age. Jews, Christians, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains crowded into her . . . fancy-dress balls, and the Sultan himself was represented less and less naturalistically, appearing more and more often as a masked particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man; or, as his old skin dropped from him chrysalis-fashion, standing revealed as a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours of the world.

Not surprisingly then, religion and politics are the ultimate enemies because they seek to isolate, separate, and destroy. Even more than *The Satanic Verses, The Moor's Last Sigh* expresses Rushdie's antagonism to the

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chauvinism contained at the heart of all sects, creeds, and religious systems along with their political counterparts, including—in this populous landscape—Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity as well as the political leadership still in power in present-day India. Again, unerringly, Rushdie has already stirred a reaction. In India an embarrassed government has restricted the number of copies of *The Moor's Last Sigh* it will allow into the country, and in England who knows what sense of political correctness denied the novel the 1995 Booker Prize. Nonetheless, because of its energy and tolerance, its courage and its sheer entertainment value, it is difficult not to view it as heroic.

Novels have always dealt with new experience that is to some extent outside one's own life and culture. Hence the name. The product of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a more liberal era and one in which the encounter with new culture was all-important, the broadly humanistic and tolerant perspective seems to be deeply embedded in the novel form. In that sense it is not surprising that, in our uncertain times, a number of new novels show a longing, or at least a thoughtful respect, for that era.

One such novel, *Rasero*,[2] the first work of fiction by the Mexican Francisco Rebolledo, was winner of the Pegasus Prize for Literature in 1994 and translated in 1995. Set during the eighteenth century, the novel recounts the experiences of a Spaniard, Fausto Rasero, who lives in Paris and meets, during his lifetime, all the great figures of the period, including Diderot, Rousseau, Hume, Voltaire, Mozart, Madame de Pompadour, Lavoisier, and Robespierre. Admittedly this premise strains credulity (one reviewer has called Rasero the "Forrest Gump" of the Enlightenment); it also illustrates Rebolledo's desire to come to terms with the politics, philosophy, art, and science of an era perhaps more interested than we are in the rights of man.

Two qualities make the reading of Rebolledo's novel a satisfying experience. First, he does manage to make the historical figures seem human, endowing them with traits, behavior, and language that seem credible and alive. Second, Rasero himself is a character with some depth, a man with an interesting childhood, a passion for living and for love, a passion for science, and above all the outlook of a citizen of the world. Less effective is the bit of "magical realism" Rebolledo throws into the novel in the form of Rasero's unusual ability to become clairvoyant in the midst of orgasm. His "visions" (as it were) are of the future—of war and suffering in the twentieth century—and are perhaps a useful reminder that the reality of the future will not be the rosy one predicted by the Enlightenment. But neither this device nor the novel's ending (which explains how Rasero's thoughts are transmitted into the twentieth century for us to read them) is actually needed for us to appreciate all that we learn about Enlightenment history and values.

[2] RASERO, by *Francisco Rebolledo*. Trans. by *Helen R. Lane*. Louisiana State University Press. $24.95.

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Rebolledo's description of Paris as the home of Reason and the source of our beliefs regarding civil discourse, human progress, and mutual regard (perhaps a conviction more common among Latin American and European writers) seems appealing and more than justifies the narrative in literary and historical terms.

Next, a much-acclaimed American novel, by Madison Smartt Bell (sometimes a contributor to this magazine), takes up this question of human rights and its multicultural dimension in *All Souls' Rising*,[3] recounting events surrounding the slave rebellion of the 1790s in Haiti and bringing a sense of depth and reality to circumstances which have a bearing on events today. Although Bell has written a dark, and in many regards cruel depiction of the events in Haiti, he reminds us also how they, too, are related to the ideals of eighteenth-century France and to the contingencies of old- versus new-world politics, including racial politics, in that era.

At the time of the French Revolution, the French colony of Saint Domingue, now Haiti, was a country of planters, white townspeople, slaves, ex-slaves, and mulattos, conservatives and radicals, many of them struggling to secure the same rights being demanded by individuals in Europe. The outbreak of a slave rebellion (manipulated by white planters as an excuse for maintaining stricter controls) allows all the issues—racial and economic as well as social and political—to come to the fore. It also allows Bell to write an exciting book in which most of the historical interest centers on a second-generation African slave named Toussaint L'Ouverture, a charismatic leader of the rebellion and ultimately a man of peace. Toussaint epitomizes the qualities of a founding father. He desires freedom and equality for himself and others but within the framework of Republican ideals. He respects intelligence and reason and has educated himself in the European as well as the African traditions; therefore, he is respected by parties on all sides of the conflict and is able to negotiate with all of them. Bell's achievement is to give substance to a legend. (The unsettling irony of Toussaint's life is that he was imprisoned in France during the Bonapartist retrenchment.)

Bell's canvas is large. He presents the historical circumstances through the thoughts and experiences of a variety of characters, all with their own ambitions, all caught up in the violence of the revolution itself. Among these are a French doctor—whose scientific objectivity and open-mindedness make him a symbol of the new, more tolerant Republican man—his mulatto mistress, her brother (also a mulatto), a planter, a runaway slave, a priest (who also has a wife and children), and two slave-chieftains, warrior-generals in the rebellion. Each has enough depth to keep the story from degenerating into melodrama, Bell's insistence in describing torture and mayhem down to the bloodiest detail notwithstanding. If there is a flaw in the novel it is here, in the insistence that all atrocities committed by all sides be completely

[3] ALL SOULS' RISING, by *Madison Smartt Bell*. Pantheon. $25.95.

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documented: the most terrifying moment of the novel occurs when one of the characters, a mulatto, flays and dissects his own white father, alive when the process began—thus bringing new meaning to the idea that there are no differences beneath the skin.

Bell is the author of nine works of fiction, many of them influenced by war, tropical and foreign as well as urban and domestic. *All Souls' Rising,* however, is clearly a step up in achievement, especially in its ability to take a complex history and theme and manage it to a thoughtful as well as an emotionally compelling conclusion. It will be interesting to see how he sustains this effort in forthcoming volumes projected for this multi-volume series.

A more philosophically fascinating and bookishly entertaining excursion into the forces emerging from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is Umberto Eco's new novel, *The Island of the Day Before,*[4] which borrows a considerable amount of its energy by imitating the literary products of the times which he describes. The novel is, in this respect, a narrative about a shipwrecked character, Roberto della Griva, a young man from northern Italy who despite his personal idiosyncracies (he is, for example, a photophobe who cannot endure sunlight) still manages to play the role of a representative adventurer of the post-Renaissance.

On his first adventure as a youth, Roberto participates in a siege of the town of Casale in northern Italy where factions of the Thirty Years' War give the young man a lesson in grief (his father is killed in the conflict), love, the conflicting allegiances of religion and atheism, and the rich complexities of thought and language. As in Eco's first novel, *The Name of the Rose,* the author pays homage to his interest in language by having one of the characters in this one invent an "Aristotelian machine" for creating metaphors.

Next, unable to face the prospect of retiring to his native estate, Roberto also travels to Paris where he meets the great philosophers and poets, becomes himself a modest practitioner in these arts, again falls in love, and runs afoul of the great Cardinal Mazarin. Because Roberto has made an impassioned speech on the power of sympathy at a social gathering where he has sought to impress Lilia, his remote and unapproachable love, he is trapped by the cardinal into embarking on an around-the-world voyage with the mysterious Dr. Byrd, who is reputed to use this same sympathetic power in attempting to solve the most important riddle of this expansionist and competitive age—the secret of determining accurate longitudes on long sea voyages. As in Eco's second novel, *Foucault's Pendulum,* the author uses the history of (false) science to create a cabalistic tale of the dangers as well as the rewards of the search for truth through the complex and often deceiving mechanisms of arcane philosophy. Finally shipwrecked, but marooned not on an island like Robinson Crusoe but rather on another

[4] THE ISLAND OF THE DAY BEFORE, by *Umberto Eco.* Trans. by *William Weaver.* Harcourt Brace. $25.00.

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ship, Roberto, who cannot swim, is left to contemplate the meaning of existence and of his own life among the wreckage.

All too clearly the ship, with its artifacts of human inhabitation, is Eco's means to announce that familiar overarching, post-modernist, and post-structuralist theme that human beings are trapped within what they inherit linguistically and philosophically from their cultures (Eco is a famous scholar and semiotician), and the remainder of the tale kaleidoscopically swirls around a variety of philosophical caprices centering on the idea that knowledge and experience may enlarge your sympathies and engage your understanding but that—even here on the international date line, with the "Island of the Day Before" just over there on the other side of the meridian—you can neither escape your past nor can you go home again. A fable of self-definition and self-identification, which includes the imaginary appearance of imaginary Roberto's evil twin, the novel reminds us that a principal way in which we learn about ourselves is through the process of encountering new cultures, new experience, new science, a new sense of history and of time.

Encountering the other as a means of encountering the self is also an important characteristic of a much more brutal and down-to-earth novel, actual winner of the Booker Prize in 1995, *The Ghost Road*,[5] by Englishwoman Pat Barker. Third in a trilogy of novels detailing the experiences of a real historical figure W.H.R. Rivers, distinguished neurologist and social anthropologist who treated cases of shell shock at the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh during World War I, this volume broadens the scope of the trilogy and shows Rivers struggling to come to terms with the horror and futility of the war by comparing it to his pre-war experiences as an anthropologist in Melanesia. Volumes one and two of the trilogy showed Rivers treating such well-known historical figures as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Wilfred Owen, all of whom spent some time at Craiglockhart, and Owen's death in the final offensive of the war is reported in the current volume by Billy Prior, Barker's bisexual working-class hero, who has himself been treated by Rivers and who writes to the doctor from the front.

Piling irony upon appalling irony, Barker creates a picture of the mental destructiveness of the war and the challenge it offers to our cultural credibility and self-esteem when life and death to Rivers seem fully as reasonable among the head-hunting aborigines he studied in the South Pacific as among his encounters in England during the war.

Finally, in Kazuo Ishiguro's new novel *The Unconsoled*,[6] the artist once again finds himself between cultures, but this time for reasons that are a good deal more bizarre. First, Ishiguro himself is a puzzle (I am not referring to his name or country of origin). Since a certain austerity attaches itself to his treatment of his subjects, it is sometimes difficult to guess his intention. This was true of his highly-regarded novel *The*

[5] THE GHOST ROAD, by *Pat Barker*. Dutton. $21.95.
[6] THE UNCONSOLED, by *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.00.

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Remains of the Day, which was a much more powerful indictment of the characters and of the British class system between the wars than was captured in the Merchant-Ivory costume drama through which it is largely known. Simply, the surface of Ishiguro's prose is so textured that it is hard to know which of his characters to believe or sympathize with.

Like *The Remains of the Day*, *The Unconsoled* is told in the first person by a narrator—in this case a man named Ryder—who is ill-equipped to understand or comment on the events flowing around him. Ryder is a musician, a pianist, who has arrived late one evening in an unnamed European city where he is expected, over the next few days, to give a concert, to make himself available to the press, and to attend a variety of social events all because of his stature as an artist. At the outset he seems confused, misses several appointments, seems always to be rushing to his next obligation but always to be delayed by one accident or another. The effect is Kafkaesque, a swirling mixture of inexplicable guilt and dislocation in time. Along the way we discover that Ryder may or may not have visited or inhabited the city before; he may or may not have a wife and child there with whom he has a dysfunctional and guilt-ridden relationship. Or perhaps, we think, he may be too easily led, too willing to comply with all the roles (including the role as husband and father) which others have arranged for him. In any case, a certain boredom attaches itself to Ishiguro's description of Ryder's behavior, similar to what you might find in an Ionesco play, as in episode after episode nothing comes to fruition (a friend and I have agreed that an equally good title for this work would be *The Unrelenting*).

Ryder's lack of comprehension is all the more distressing, and funny, because his hosts insist on deferring to his opinions, expect him to judge their city and the state of their artistic and cultural well-being on the strength of his superior insight as an artist. But the truth is Ryder is no judge. Like many artists, he appears to be extremely gifted in doing one thing—in this case, playing the piano. Mostly he would like to find some practice time and make sure the hall is ready for his performance. Otherwise, he is merely confused about the other roles he must play. He may even think he deserves to be listened to on matters relating to the arts. But if the nervous bourgeoisie of this unremarkable city expect him to pass judgment on their shallow boosterism, lack of imagination and memory, and insensitivity to people already in their midst, they will remain, as in the title, unconsoled.

In this novel, Ishiguro has created a monument to boredom, accident, indifference, obtuseness, pretension, and misunderstanding—a great negative adventure that is at once darkly humorous and a striking moral commentary on the conditions under which art must be created and consumed. *The Unconsoled* shares qualities with works by Thomas Mann or perhaps the great Austrian novelist Thomas Bernhard, works skeptical of the status of artists and antagonistic to the culture in which they operate. Within culture, these artists find themselves between cultures as well.

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HAROLD FROMM

Andrew Ross, Democritus Junior, and the Curse of Postmodernism

IN 1621, ROBERT BURTON, A RECLUSIVE CLERIC and polymath scholar who lived among the fellows at Oxford, published his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a monumental compendium of Classical and Renaissance learning that went through many editions as one of the most popular books of its time. Adopting the persona of Democritus Junior, in honor of "the laughing philosopher" who took human follies in his stride, Burton—with bemused and often dotty wit—looked kindly on the sorry mess of human history in the West, trying to wrest some order from the chaos and madness of conflicting opinions and bizarre customs he found in the multiplicities of his heritage. Retelling or quoting practically everything written—from the Greek and Roman classics through the church fathers and Renaissance poets and playwrights—Burton developed a wildly allusive, madcap style that leaves one feeling slightly dizzy. Speaking about the misery of scholars, for example, he writes:

> Leonartus Fuchsius, Felix Plater, Hercules de Saxonia, speak of a peculiar *fury*, which comes by overmuch study. Fernelius puts *study*, contemplation, and continual meditation, as an especial cause of madness: and in his 86th Consultation cites the same words. Jo. Arculanus, amongst other causes reckons up overmuch study: so doth Levinas Lemnius. *Many men* (saith he) *come to this malady by continual study, and night-waking* . . . : and such, Rhasis adds, *that have commonly the finest wits.* Marsilius Ficinus puts Melancholy amongst one of those five principal plagues of students. . . .[1]

And so on for a thousand pages. For each subject discussed, endless sources are cited and quoted, providing evidence first for one position and then its opposite, until finally Burton decides, insofar as he is capable of deciding anything, that the truth lies somewhere in between.

It's not the case that Burton is totally without opinions of his own, but his head has been filled to self-cancelling overflow by the bibliography of his day, not to mention the conflicts and doubts generated about medieval truisms by the burgeoning New Science which, as his contem-

[1] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith (New York, 1938), p. 259.

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porary, John Donne, had put it, "calls all in doubt." A good case could be made for Burton as an early warning system for postmodernism, a sweet learned wacko whose crumbling, overrich universe turned his brains into a maelstrom of intellectual fragments that no longer fit into any coherent system.

As I read Andrew Ross's latest collection of essays, *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life: Nature's Debt to Society*,[2] echoes of Burton's voice kept wafting through the static of this relentless overload of postmodern fragments, just as they did in his previous book, *Strange Weather*.

> A chronology of twentieth-century channelers would run from pioneers like Eileen Garret, Alice Bailey, the channelers of the *Urantia Book*, Edgar Cayce, and Jane Roberts's "Seth," to the more recent international flood of trance technicians: the Findhorn circle, the Columbia University psychologists who channeled *A Course in Miracles*, Elizabeth Clare Prophet (recent architect of the great Montana bomb shelter), J.Z. Knight's "Ramtha," Kevin Ryerson's multiple entities, Jach Pursel's "Lazaris," Jessica Lansing's "Michael," Penny Torres's "Mafu," Thomas Jacobson's "Dr Peebles," Ruth Norman's "Tesla," Shawn Randall's "Torah," Ken Carey's Starseed Transmissions, Sanya Roman's "Orin". . . .[3]

and so on, a compulsive, compendious, recondite, intemperate enumeration of authorities, reeled off in a burst of half-demented virtuosity. Yet what has it finally produced but almost unreadable evidence of . . . of what?

If Burton, a cleric who gathered information mostly from books, interspersed his databank of authorities and examples with spurts of autobiography as an unworldly recluse, Ross as academic critic relieves his dense forays into popular culture with reminiscences of a boyhood in Scotland, of conversations heard and overheard in a shop in New York's SoHo or a swimming pool in Waikiki, and with recurring apologies for not being an ethnographer in the field but only a worldly/unworldly scholar—dependent (like Burton) on secondary sources such as books and magazines. If Ross has any claim to achievement, it's the sheer ability to get all this stuff into his head, to digest it with such obsessive gusto, to attempt, with however limited success, to turn it into some sense.

In a shrewd and ironic article in *New York* magazine (Nov. 14, 1994), Rebecca Mead gives us a profile of Ross (complete with several goofy photos) as a hip, iconoclastic rock star/professor in his popular classes at N.Y.U., whose positions, however strong in the lecture room, are hard to pin down in his writings. "Ross," she acutely observes, "wears his

[2] THE CHICAGO GANGSTER THEORY OF LIFE: Nature's Debt to Society, by *Andrew Ross*. Verso. $24.95.

[3] *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* was published by Verso in 1991.

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learning lightly but his knowingness heavily." But despite this knowingness, one of the pervasive problems for his readers is the uncertainty as to where this overwhelming learning in popular culture is taking us, for it is a knowingness sprung from an epistemology that claims little or nothing can be known. His favorite locutionary device, "On the one hand . . . on the other hand," is an oft-repeated testimony to the undecidability of things and the inconclusiveness of all conclusions in the postmodern data factory. Even when this knowingness takes on an air of Foucaultian paranoia (as in his highly critical accounts of the self-regarding power that underlies the institutions of capitalist society), the paranoia itself comes off as inauthentic, as a pose, as another one of his multiple personae, since, "on the other hand," he routinely recants much of the critical unmasking he has just performed. Not even paranoia can be authentic in a socially constructed universe of equally plausible antinomies produced by informational overload.

Reading Ross's last three books (beginning with *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* in 1989)[4] confirms my depressing sense of recent postmodern critical writing: databank-style learning, a lack of persuasive opinions (apart from the automatic obeisances to race, gender, and class), and an inability to produce clear, graceful, engaging critical prose. The results are books at the margins of both credibility and readability.

As I struggle with Ross, Lawrence Buell (whom I discussed in Winter 1996), and Donna Haraway, for example, I find myself more engaged with their books' formal properties than with their contents, because their narrative personae fail to convey authority, a failure that is not a question of insufficient learning but of insufficient belief in what they themselves are saying. (Can a postmodern author be an authority?) In the case of Ross, his books are collections of pieces, some previously published, for which he has written new general introductions to pull together what he claims to be saying in the hundreds of pages that follow. I say "claims" because in *Strange Weather* and *The Chicago Gangster Theory of Life* he only *imagines* he has written books on the subjects he introduces. The mere resurfacing of a set of themes through loosely related essays is a far cry from coherent argument, a failing Ross himself defensively acknowledges in the introduction to *No Respect* when he remarks that to do justice to the variety of his contents it was necessary "to refuse any high theoretical ground . . . and to enter the fray." After these impressive introductions, however, things rapidly begin to fall apart as the recalcitrance and overload of the material become only too apparent. In "The Ecology of Images," for example, an essay in *Chicago Gangster*, he begins by discussing the Gulf War and its media representations, then billboards on highways, Susan Sontag on photography, Bill McKibben on information and ecology, TV's treatments of the environ-

[4] *No Respect* is from Routledge.

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ment, science fiction, then launches into a long rambling excursus on military test bombing sites in Nevada. As each of these themes is indulged with little sense of its strategic role in the essay as a whole, the effect is more like a sequence of surreal music videos than a constructed argument. Although the ecology theme is recurrent, the whole loosely assembled edifice finally collapses under its own uncontrolled weight, the narrative energies scattered and diffused. And for Ross the problem seems to be getting worse. In the early *No Respect*, the essays *really are*, as he claims, about intellectuals and popular culture. At least two, "The Popularity of Pornography" and "Defenders of the Faith and the New Class," are first rate, perhaps the only ones in these collections with sufficient intellectual and rhetorical power to persuade. Otherwise, his later essays tend to be too long, rambling, self-indulgent, and inconclusive. There is a depletion of substance and a straining for effect.

Given postmodernism's repudiation of "humanism," its obsession with "information," its inability to "believe" much beyond today's political clichés about diversity, its fix on popular culture, and its distrust of representation, of narrative, and even of "clarity," it is hardly surprising that postmodern critical prose seems innocent of the high art required to produce authoritative writing. (Ross informs Richard Rorty: "Nor will it do to insist on the language of clarity and plainspeak. . . . The insistence on plain prose is all too often used as a means of excluding complex or radical insights . . ."[5] but it seems a little absurd for Ross even to imply such inadequacies in Rorty's potently limpid writing.) For a philosophic position that regards *everything* as mediated and nothing as directly accessible, everything as "socially constructed" and nothing as "natural," postmodernism's faith in its own communicativeness—no matter how disorganized, imprecisely expressed, obscure or professionally local, inattentive to the resources of its audience—is hard to explain. Writing is a socially constructed achievement par excellence, an artful contrivance based on intuited as well as learned "rules," not just an outburst of sincerity or self-proclaiming "presence." Yet Ross, for all his hipness and intellectual sophistication, has not fully grasped what a highly mediated contrivance it really is, or how much art is required to promote its readers' comprehension and engagement through skillful manipulation of figure, syntax, and structure. Although he can produce brilliant passages as well as sprinklings of vivacious pop-talk, much of the prose is unremittingly gray and woolly, numbingly abstract, emotionally limp, lacking in the persuasive power that only skilled rhetoric and real belief can achieve: "At the same time, the paradigm of cultural essentialism has also helped to reinforce primordialist views of native custom promoted in the postcolonial period by Westernized national elites seeking a socially cohesive identity for their newly independent states." Multiply *that* by a few hundred pages!

[5] "On Intellectuals in Politics," *Dissent* (Spring, 1992), p. 264.

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Ross describes himself as a leftist libertarian. He sees individual freedoms as inextricably intertwined with social institutions, so he is not a proponent of "government off our backs" but of government that furthers individual developments and pleasures without subjecting them to a domination by any particular overarching world-view. His objection to the "liberal imagination" of Trilling's day is that it was the imagination of a particular elitist social class trying to enforce (by making them seem "natural") its moralistic aesthetics upon the entire spectrum of American society, a spectrum various and submerged and thus hardly amenable to the preferences of a coterie of New York intellectuals. In its place he advocates a "liberatory imagination" that allows for irreconcilable diversities and pleasures, both cultural and sexual. Intellectuals need to "*learn from* the forms and discourses of popular pleasure, rather than adopting or supporting a legislative posture in the name of the popular." He goes rather far, however, when he decides that "the exercise of cultural taste, wherever it is applied today, remains one of the most efficient guarantors of anti-democratic power relations," and his optimism regarding technology, the pop arts, and cyberculture is hard to share. He doesn't seem to realize that democratic "community" depends on public standards, both aesthetic and ethical. No community can exist in a free-for-all without hierarchy, so it is a question of which hierarchy will do the best for the most. Would Ross really prefer his life to be determined by the sleazy corporate forces of commercial television rather than by an updated version of Trilling and his cohorts? His own particular strengths, in any case, are those of an academic legatee of the Trilling era, while his weaknesses are the very product of what he extols.

Ross's position on ecology, a pervasive theme in his books, is similar to Murray Bookchin's, a "social ecology" that regards environmental problems as offshoots of social problems, though he is without Bookchin's implausible utopianism (offering instead some nebulous exhortations toward "a radical reorganization of social life on the planet"). His announced theme in *Chicago Gangster* is to "warn against the tendency, surfacing again, and often in the name of environmentalism, to wield biological authority as a model for social well-being. In short, we may soon be engaged yet again [i.e., as in Malthusian/Darwinian politics and economics] in the struggle to prevent nature becoming the referee of our fate." In particular, he is vociferously against the use of "scarcity" (of natural resources, due to population growth and environmental degradation) as a political weapon by the "haves" to exert control over the "have nots," whether First World over Third or Gingrichian Republicans over the masses. He believes, along with Bookchin, that it is the inequity of social institutions that causes scarcity rather than simply a failure of natural resources, though it's important to stress that he is a committed environmentalist who does not regard today's ecological problems as imaginary. Although he calls his stance "utopian socialism," unlike many leftist academics who constantly criticize capitalist exploitation and its destruction of people

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and places, he is not really hostile to the market economy, which he sees (like Camille Paglia, with whom he has a lot in common) as a source of many of our freedoms. So, for example, the pornography industry has become both a vehicle of capitalist exploitation *and* a means of gratification of diverse sexualities that the liberal imagination would have found *infra dig*. Similarly he finds that popular music, however much disparaged by intellectuals as "commercial," is made available by industry for *local* reappropriations that eventually do speak for its audiences. And again, parting company with many ecological types, he is not opposed to technology per se but rather to the uses to which it has been put by corporate and military hegemonies.

Like Paglia, Ross has favorable things to say about the Enlightenment, which so many leftist academics now pretend to despise: "However mechanistic, instrumental, and utilitarian, rationalism has also thrown up evolved institutions which are not necessarily linked to capitalism's grow-or-die ethic. . . . This complex of circumstances and traditions cannot be wholly dismissed as male property, whether in the modern or the post-Neolithic period, without shutting out from history altogether the experience of too many people, especially women. . . ." Even his extensive bashing of science for its rationalist mantle and "single standard of truth" in *Strange Weather* is more than once recanted. Science may be just another socially constructed tale, but when push comes to shove, it's a tale he is ready to believe.

The *Chicago Gangster* collection starts off badly with an interminable essay on eco-tourism in Polynesia that exhibits the kaleidoscopic side-tracking, mutual cancellations, self-indulgence, knowingness and all the other liabilities of Ross's writings. Zeroing in on the Mormon-operated Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii, Ross suggests that the Center is an exhibit of Western romantic myths about native cultures that simultaneously attempts to preserve such a culture while turning it into a commercialized specimen of capitalist "high-tech primordialism." Although an interesting essay on this subject could have been written, by going off into elaborate accounts of the Mormons, of IMAX movies, and whatnot in his characteristic artless way, Ross does a disservice to his remarkable talent for raking up potentially enlightening arcane pop material. Another essay, called "Bombing the Big Apple." begins (for effect) with some remarks about the bombing of the World Trade Center, although in reality the discussions that follow are about the ways in which the poor and the middle class were displaced from Manhattan's financial district in order to develop it for global corporate profits, as symbolized by the twin towers. For Ross, the real "bombing" is the treatment by the haves of the have-nots, with glances at environmental racism, social ecology, the shifting of wealth upwards, and the nature of cities. But at key moments that beg for carefully developed arguments, the essay prefers to fall back on politico-literary conceits.

Ross wraps things up with a look at the determinist tendencies of sociobiology, about which he reiterates "the need to resist and chal-

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lenge the growing reliance upon the authority of 'nature' to deal with problems that are primarily social both in their origin and in their solution." His fear is that the notion of genes as destiny provides a foundation for totalitarian repression and encourages the ecology movement to constrict human freedoms, again in the interest of the haves. "Unlike the other new social movements, ecology is commonly perceived as the one that says no, the antipleasure voice that says you're never gonna get it, so get used to going without." At times, however, Ross's pro-pleasure optimism (recalling the Counterculture of the sixties) enables him to play down the very real liabilities of worldwide population growth and its degradation of land, air, and water.

Once again I have devoted much of my space to a book's formal qualities rather than its contents. However wild Ross's classroom manner may happen to be, his written thoughts are surprisingly moderate, albeit with periodic eruptions of the elitist anti-elitist's need to *épater le bourgeois* (particularly when he is trying on modish ideas or miming Foucaultian paranoia). His intelligence, his manic industriousness to work up one subject after another in order to speak as well-informed from a fresh perspective, and his failure to fit precisely into any of leftist academia's wearisome niches—all of this is appealing, even if he is not fully believable. That is to say, his frequently middle-of-the road conclusions—after much glitzy *Sturm und Drang*—undercut his radical postures, his good-sense life-needs conflicting with his academic superstar's image-needs. But my summaries of his books (with all of the detritus left out) are more orderly, intelligible, and convincing than the books themselves and are apt to make them seem better than they really are. It is the curse of postmodernism, its influence on his sensibility and mentality, its generation of protean shallow-rooted personae, that hamstring his writing, luring him into Burtonian self-cancellation, into artless, often glib and perverse, throwaway expositions, despite—or perhaps because of—the overrichness of his materials and the insights he has aplenty. As an anti-Polonius, he needs to be told, "Less matter, more art."

To glance at Wendell Berry's new collection of essays, *Another Turn of the Crank*,[6] is to see more vividly the lost world that Ross leaves behind. If the curse of postmodernism on an urban academic like Ross is the plethora of fragments that has produced and nurtured him but is disposed to destroy him after his allotted three minutes of fame (fifteen is no longer possible), the curse on Berry is its destruction of the rich and enabling rural world out of which he has developed and matured, for all practical purposes, as an ecological mystic. With dirt under his fingernails, Berry has no uncertainties about his provenance, his identity, his literary persona, his aesthetics, his ethics, his politics, his goals for humanity. As a lifelong farmer, in 1996 he is a more radical thinker

[6] ANOTHER TURN OF THE CRANK, by *Wendell Berry*. Counterpoint. $18.00.

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than Ross insofar as he refuses to go with the flow rather than to embrace the destructive element. He speaks of farming as "a high and difficult art," of government as a (failed) protector of its citizens against "economic conquest" and of his assumption "that a people who are entirely lacking in economic self-determination, whether personal or local" cannot be governed democratically. He explains:

> I write, as I must, from the point of view of a country person, a member of a small rural community that has been dwindling rapidly since the end of World War II. Only the most fantastical optimism could ignore the possibility that my community is doomed—that it was doomed by the overwhelming victory of industrialism over agrarianism (both North and South) in the Civil War and the history both subsequent and consequent to it. It may be that my community—its economy, its faith, its local knowledge, its affection for itself and its place—will dwindle on for another generation or two and then disappear or be replaced by a commuters' suburb. If it is doomed, then I have no doubt much else is doomed also, for I do not see how a nation, a society, or a civilization can live while its communities die.

In many ways this small, self-dependent, somewhat libertarian, ecologically oriented community is the very sort of municipality that Murray Bookchin had in mind to fight the global economy's depredations. Though Ross also believes in community, he is too urban and technological to share such a vision and as a believer in the future he is prepared to roll with the punches. Berry experiences the highly motivated, self-sustaining farm culture, both economically and affectively, as an ideal human organization, now being destroyed by impersonal corporations that move in, cut down the trees or mine the earth, and then move on, leaving ecological and economic ruin in their wake, while forcing farmers into the city for low-paying, family-destroying, planet-wrecking jobs. Characterizing himself as a Jeffersonian democrat, to the liberals he would complain that government is too big and too controlling; to the conservatives he would point out that the supranational economy they are pushing is even worse than the government they claim to want off their backs.

These wise, rich, persuasive essays, written with the clarity, deftness, and simplicity of a venerable prose master, provide only short-lived uplift because, as Berry is well aware, his program is hopelessly anachronistic and doomed and his battle tragically rearguard. And for all of Ross's wish to believe that mass culture is and ought to be the *Volksgeist* of the present, it's hard to convince oneself that the "twin tower" commercialism he accuses of destroying "community" in New York's financial district will somehow nevertheless save us, after all, in the more erotically enticing guise of commercialized pop culture. Though his intentions look benign, he may only be romancing the serpents of a postmodern Laocoon.

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THOMAS M. DISCH

North American Addresses: Two Verse Narratives

THOUGH NARRATIVE VERSE HAS ENJOYED A SMALL RENAISSANCE in the past decade, it continues to be regarded—or rather, disregarded—as an outmoded and déclassé art form. Reviewers encountering the rare specimen tend to fall into two camps—those who seek out some high-minded connection to the great tradition of epic verse from Homer through Milton (an effort at which the poet may have assisted by strewing his path with mythopoeic tics and homages, as Derek Walcott does in *Omeros*) and those who would permit Calliope to appear in less than full armor and who demand from narrative poetry only those pleasures they are accustomed to derive from reading novels. Since only a few long poems purvey such pleasures (Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* of 1986 has been the most conspicuous recent example), using such a yardstick can only yield a sense that most narrative verse offers its readers short measure.

By and large, therefore, critics of poetry simply don't interest themselves in narrative verse that is not the work of an already well-established poet like Walcott or James Merrill, and this neglect sends a clear signal to poets: Don't bother. The lyric meditation, the confessional anecdote, the barbaric yawp—these are the forms proper to contemporary poetry, and if you must aspire to write longer poems, think to create sheaves and bundles of the sanctioned shorter forms, after the manner of the longer-winded modernists, Pound, Williams, Olson. To do otherwise is to court comparison with such poetic pariahs as Robinson Jeffers, or Stephen Vincent Benét, or (if you compound the felony with rhyming stanzas) Robert Service.

That narrative verse is making a comeback despite such proscriptions can be traced to the fact that poets share our common culture, a culture saturated with fiction and make-believe. A good portion of all elementary and secondary education is devoted to teaching children to be capable readers and interpreters of prose fiction. When those children would avoid the novels they've been assigned for homework, they venture out upon the vaster sea of stories available on TV. I have known one or two poets of repute to say that they don't read novels or go to movies and subsist entirely on a diet of poetry, as once some few anorexic saints were said to have had no nourishment except the Eucharist. My reaction, in both cases, is reverence mixed with skepticism.

Poets who would embark upon a narrative career have the option of

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writing novels, of course, and there are compelling reasons for following that route. A novel is likelier to be published, will surely receive a better advance, and stands a far better chance of being widely reviewed and read. Poets as diverse as Robert Graves, James Dickey, Sylvia Plath, Robert Penn Warren, and D.M. Thomas have written novels that *are* novels, and bestsellers at that. By contrast, narrative poems do not—or not usually—aspire to the condition of the novel. Nor yet is it useful (for poet or reader) to consider them as lineal descendants of the epic tradition, except insofar as all fiction, by an accident of literary history, is part of that tradition. Homer and Vergil are as little useful as role models for a narrative poet today as the ruins of Mycenae to a contemporary architect.

Theory should proceed from example. Let us consider here two books that are exemplary in both senses of that word. Both are published by Story Line Press, the first by the press's editor, Robert McDowell,[1] the second by David Mason.[2] As its name would suggest, Story Line Press has been an active promoter of narrative verse, having published works by Frederick Pollack (*The Adventure*, 1986) and Mark Jarman (*Iris*, 1992) that have been benchmarks of the new narrative poetry. Indeed, Jarman's *Iris* so closely parallels McDowell's and Mason's poems in its taxonomy as to comprise with them the basis for a kind of esthetic triangulation.

The Diviners and *The Country I Remember* are of roughly equal length—55 to 57 pages, not counting blank intercalary pages in the former and twelve short poems bulking out the latter volume. *The Diviners* is told in five "chapters" of fluently variegated blank verse, each chapter set in a new decade from the fifties through the nineties. Mason's poem is less regular metrically, the predominantly pentameter lines being grouped into seven-line stanzas with an occasional singleton line serving to give closure to a dramatic sequence. There are twelve titled sections featuring, in alternation, the first-person "oral" memoirs of John Mitchell, a lieutenant in the Union Army and prisoner in the Confederacy's Libby Prison, and of his daughter Maggie Gresham, a pioneer (with her family and on her own) of the Far West.

Both narratives are notably cool in their handling of materials that would, in the hands of most novelists, be milked for a vicarious and sensational interest. The opening chapter of *The Diviners* (which appeared first in *The Hudson Review* and was reprinted in *The Best American Poetry 1989*) has a plot line that might do duty as the kickoff for a James M. Cain thriller. A wife neglected by her businessman husband has an affair with her eight-year-old son's science teacher. A female private detective hired by the husband blackmails the wife, and the teacher has

[1] THE DIVINERS, by *Robert McDowell*. Peterloo Poets, distributed by Story Line Press. $10.00p.

[2] THE COUNTRY I REMEMBER, by *David Mason*. Story Line Press. $21.00; $12.00. The poem has also appeared, in its entirety, in the Summer 1995 issue (Volume XLVIII, Number 2) of *The Hudson Review*.

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his legs broken. The wife rebels, spends half a year crisscrossing "the bleak Southwest":

> One month she deals blackjack in Las Vegas,
> Or pushes drinks in Bisbee, types in Austin.
> In Santa Fe she's fired for drinking too much.
> Her money thin, her prospects all played out,
> She calls again and says she's coming home.
> Al hears the liquor in her voice and smiles,
> And tells her not so fast.
> "I filed last month,"
> He says to no immediate reply.
> "I asked for custody, but I'll drop it all
> If you agree to fix yourself and stay."
>
> Exhausted, bitter, Eleanor agrees.

Whereupon the story turns its attention away from the prison of Al and Eleanor's marriage and concentrates on their son Tom and whether he will be integrated into the society that has hollowed out his parents' souls. The sixties offer this prospect:

> The decade drowns in violence and blood,
> Conspiracies and unacknowledged coups.
> The nation seems to lie down willingly
> As Tom gets older, filling up with grief.
> The faces and the land ahead look bleak,
> And he begins to hear about the war.
> Desolated, angrier each day,
> He'd like to kill. A war is one good way.

Let us leave Tom there on the brink of the seventies for a moment (where, happily, McDowell himself switches gears, narratively, from noir—"Desolated, angrier each day"—to a tone of mellow chagrin) and consider the same nation a century earlier. Fully half of *The Country I Remember* is given to the Civil War and prison memoirs of John Mitchell. If there has been any event in American history that would seem to lend itself to an epical, neo-Homeric treatment it would be the Civil War, and from the first American poets have accepted the invitation. Herman Melville wrote a book of bombastic verse dioramas, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, a literary curiosity that only his biographers could love. Even grander in manner and design is Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* (1927), once a staple of high school classrooms, but decisively exiled from the canon now that high school reading skills and attention spans are so much diminished.[3]

[3] If the renaissance of narrative verse should take deep enough root, perhaps the critical establishment may reappraise *John Brown's Body*. Modernist it's not, but Benét's poetic competence can't be brushed off as easily as that. The New Narrative school of poets has

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The problem with the Civil War as a theme for poetry is that its battlefields and main events have become as smooth and *known* as the turf of an often-revisited golf course. Its moral dimensions seem so monolithically clear that the poet (and reader) has little to do but choose sides, then purchase the appropriate uniform (dedicated re-enactors can spend a small fortune getting kitted up), and start pretending. David Mason confronts this problem with two ploys characteristic of the new narrative poetry: (1) his poem is artfully self-referential in that it is *about* the need of ancient mariners, war veterans, and the rest of us to tell and retell the tales that have traumatized us (about, to put it another way, our *need* for poetry);[4] (2) he favors anticlimax to a big dramatic payoff. A case in point is his account of how Mitchell, in digging an escape tunnel from Libby Prison, creates an egress prematurely. Such a plot-hinge was used as a cliffhanger to bridge the two parts of John Frankenheimer's recent television mini-series, "Andersonville." Mason uses it as a prelude to a bout of pneumonia that prevents Mitchell joining those who escape; we are privy, instead, to his fever-dreams—and even these are rendered in his usual laconic voice. To be denied even a chance to fail is surely the height of the anticlimactic.

What, one may fairly ask of any long story, whether in verse or prose, is the point? What does the author want to tell us? Both of Mason's narrators answer that question straightforwardly on his behalf. Mitchell, dictating to an amanuensis, says:

> Sometimes I think of all the blood we've spilled,
> but thinking that way only brings bad dreams.
> It's good to have the young ones coming by
> for visits, though Maggie never had her own
> and she's still living in California.
> Mrs. Mitchell died twelve years ago.
> It came sudden. The doctor said a stroke.
>
> Forty-eight years together, she and I,
> and most of it was work. A fellow can't
> put into words the help she gave us all.
> Not only the children. There were bad days
> when glumness got the better of me, she said,
> "Mitch, you've come too far to give up now."
> I talk a lot, but some things I can't say.

Maggie's summing-up is equally terse and stoic in its reticences. Writing in 1956 she speaks of her own surviving sibling:

already mounted a strong case for the work of Robinson Jeffers, another poet who offended academia by being too widely read.

[4] In this regard, Mason's essay, "The Poetry of Life and the Life of Poetry," in the Winter 1996 issue (Volume XLVIII, Number 4), of *The Hudson Review*, can be read as a pendant to his poem, since it is specifically concerned with the social utility of poetry.

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Olive's living still in Pomeroy
and likes to call me on the telephone
to ask about the weather. She came down
to visit not long after Howard died
and went to see the houses of the stars.
My nieces and nephews are all grown up
and like to see Aunt Maggie in L.A.

They say to grow old without children is
a curse, and sometimes I believe it's true—
to have so much to say and no one here
to say it to. . . .

The lives of Mason's two protagonists (and of McDowell's Tom and Jarman's Iris, as well) are not so much uneventful as antidramatic. They eschew excitement and seek the peculiar, luminous peace associated with lyric and elegiac poetry. Confrontations are put on hold, resolutions deferred. Mason's title is taken from a poem by Trumbull Stickney, "Mnemosyne," that is a touchstone for both Mitchell and Maggie, especially its last line, "It rains across the country I remember." Mason does not quote the immediately preceding lines, though they must be considered his poem's second, secret epigraph:

But that I knew these places are my own,
I'd ask how came such wretchedness to cumber
The earth, and I to people it alone.

In both *The Diviners* and *The County I Remember*, children leave their parents and hometown to become rootless wanderers in what is seen to be a nation of drifters. The North American continent once had its own built-in teleology: "Go west, young man." "Westward the course of empire takes its way." In Maggie's life-itinerary, from her childhood rail journey from Illinois to Oregon until, after much aleatory shunting about, her widowhood in L.A., Mason maps out a new New World, where north and south, east and west, are all one, where there are no longer any destinations but just somewhere you happen to wind up. Similarly, at the end of *The Diviners*, Tom and his wife Elaine decide to chuck it all in, trash the monitor on their home work station, and return to the barren landscapes of Ireland. (They are childless, thanks to Tom's low sperm count.)

In bed Tom lies awake to watch the moon,
And sees the great migrations circling back,
The children home in lands their elders fled,
Back home among the births and burials.

McDowell and Mason belong to the boomer generation, the first great cohort of Americans to have experienced disillusionment as a lifelong

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dietary supplement, like the Vitamin D in their milk. First, there was the Vietnam War, a crisis mirrored significantly in both books. Tom's father was a WW II veteran, with the strengths and blindnesses associated with triumphant success. Tom escapes his own baptism by fire by claiming, not quite sincerely, conscientious objector status; which, ironically, he is granted—a representative fate for boomer-age intellectuals. Mason's Mitchell, who spends his war years as a POW, represents another representative fate of the Vietnam era, for the POWs and MIAs were the only Vietnam veterans to have been accorded an unequivocal postwar status as heroes and martyrs.

The attitude towards marriage and child-rearing is similarly hedged in both books (and in Jarman's). Parents are reverenced, even bad parents, but their examples, as procreators of the race, is looked on askance. Tom and Elaine, like Maggie, would like to have children, but it's not in their cards. Jarman's Iris has a daughter, and she goes through the motions of a loveless marriage until she's seen that daughter married, whereupon, at once, she too turns in her resignation and departs for another landscape representative of poetry and a consoling absence.

Tales of resignation and self-abnegation told by those of mature years possess a force and credibility that is not to be found in the work of younger writers, in which such sentiments too often convey a flavor of boastfulness, like the sullen triumph on the faces of those who've been multiply pierced. Resignation must be paid for by the loss of hair and faith, by deposits of cellulite, and by a host of telling details that one usually omits from one's c.v. To a degree the sadness and wisdom of middle age are a human universal (though one that has rarely been recognized as such in official American culture, where even the elderly are concerned about their tennis game), but in the nineties, sadder-but-wiser may well become a defining element of the Zeitgeist.

The first poets of the boomer generation to be widely celebrated were those whose work most closely resembled that of established poets of an older generation. Many came across as politically correct in an oppressive way or, the inverse, as ethically spayed. The best—Albert Goldbarth, Rodney Jones, Molly Peacock—were distinguished for the qualities one expects youth to excel in: brio, energy, pizzazz. That another *kind* of good poet should begin to emerge as the boomers mature is a reasonable expectation. That expectation is confirmed in the work of McDowell, Mason, and Jarman—work that is, like the Muse invoked by Milton in "Il Penseroso," "sober, steadfast, and demure." Nothing in recent poetry would lead us to expect a revolution so quiet, so civil, so decent, and so precisely suited to our needs.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Ways of Telling

IN A 1989 INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT SHERRY, Daniel Hoffman remarked, "Maybe it was writing *Brotherly Love* that refreshed my sense of the power of narrative and longer forms, for there are ways of telling that poems can deliver better than prose." Hoffman published *Brotherly Love*, a book-length poem, in 1980. But throughout his career he has shown some interest in repossessing for poetry experiences which usually are relegated to fiction. There was his Nottingham cycle, "A Little Geste," and his series about a bard, "Taliesin," both in his second book, *A Little Geste* (1960). But interestingly, when Hoffman put together his new and selected poems from the years 1948 to 1988, *Hang-Gliding from Helicon* (1988), he did not include either. He also chose not to reprint another longish sequence, "Broken Laws," from his fifth book of the same title (1970).

So perhaps *Brotherly Love* has been the only longer poem which Hoffman regards as a signature work. Certainly it was the most integrated, a true long poem, as opposed to the discontinuities of "Broken Laws." In *Brotherly Love*, an historical poem, it is the framing of William Penn's ideals and their ultimate consequences which unify the 176-page work. As Mark Rudman has remarked, in an age of deconstruction, Hoffman seemed to be reconstructing what the "age" had torn apart.

That was sixteen years ago. Now we have another book-length poem, *Middens of the Tribe.*[1] It is an odd and oddly affecting poem of 78 pages, in ways a worthy successor to *Brotherly Love.* Hoffman, or his publisher, calls it "A Poem" on the cover and title page, and the reader first encountering the 43 discrete, untitled sections might well ask if this is not a book of 43 short poems. Such a reaction would appear justified when one first encounters #13, where a magician's assistant appears with no apparent relationship to the twenty-two preceding pages.

But, when one reads further, it becomes clear that Hoffman is gradually unfolding a series of intertwined lives, and that the relationship of a given character to the poem will ultimately become clear, or almost so. Most of the characters are seen or alluded to in section #1, a prologue of sorts in twenty quatrains. Here we meet a doctor, his wife, a laid-off railroad worker, a boy dying of meningitis, a wealthy dying Wall Street tycoon, a young woman involved in a trolley accident, and the

[1] MIDDENS OF THE TRIBE: A Poem, by *Daniel Hoffman.* Louisiana State University Press. $17.95; $9.95.

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mother of a stillborn child. Only considerably later will we discover, among many other revelations, that the trolley victim was the secretary and lover of the tycoon's son, Junior; and that her sister is the magician's assistant.

What we have, then, is a sort of novel in poetry. We had a few of these three decades ago, including the late Henri Coulette's *The War of the Secret Agents* (1966) and John Hollander's *Reflections on Espionage* (1976). Recently, with the explosion of the so-called New Formalists and Expansive Poetry, there have been other entries—Charles Martin's *Passages from Friday* (1983), Alfred Corn's *Notes from a Child of Paradise* (1984), Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986), and Nicholas Christopher's *Desperate Characters* (1988), to name four. In *Middens of the Tribe* Hoffman appears to be writing a long poem revealing how self-knowledge and self-realization come from forces beyond our control. The accidental encounter, the unopened envelope, anything can shape us into what we become. This is the opposite of confessional poetry, where everything of importance emanates from the self.

So in telling the story of the stock market tycoon and his wife and two sons and daughter—a regular family saga—Hoffman introduces additional players who will affect their lives: the tycoon's butler, Charles; a painter and his model; the mother of the dead boy; the magician; two of his other assistants; and more. Characters keep interacting, as when the fired railroad man becomes a security guard for a gallery where one of the painter's early works is hung. The only character who does not appear is the tycoon's daughter, Sis, who won't return to her father even when summoned to his deathbed. Her absence creates a regrettable void in the narrative. It is important to know what she thinks about her father, and why she is so adamant about never returning.

All these lives are limned through interior monologues, dream sequences—some of them harrowing—hallucinations, and misreadings of signs. Hoffman knows that a great deal can be learned about an individual from how he or she misreads a sign. (For years Lewis Carroll passed a sign which he always read as ROMANCEMENT. He thought it wonderful that someone had erected a sign in tribute to romancement. Then one day he saw what it had always said: ROMAN CEMENT.) Hoffman's characters misread EMERGENCY as URGENCY and PADRE as both PERDU and PER DIEM.

Of the dream sequences, #11 is the most frightening. The tycoon's daughter is sick, his car has no gas, the hospital has moved to a new location, when he finally arrives with the daughter they refuse admission because he has no medical insurance card. He finally beseeches a doctor to look at his sick daughter. But,

> —Doctor
> grasps the car doorhandle, flings it wide,

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peers in, and says The seat is empty.
You have no daughter.

This of course corresponds with the daughter's absenteeism.

The dream represents the poem at its best. On the other hand, the soliloquies of the tycoon's wife, Cora, are annoyingly repetitious, especially by the time we reach #25 and she says once more of her husband,

A man untouched by life, uncultured, his mind
a void except for business and the Market—
where would he have had the first idea
of how to find or keep another woman?

While examining the quotidian lives of his cast in a modern city, Hoffman contrasts them to the primitive lives of those subject to an archeologist's dig. The archeologist is Bud, the tycoon's second son, and Bud draws conclusions about primitive courting, mating, sexuality, and acceptance of death. These attitudes are distinctly different from patterns seen today. The precise archeological language gives a unique texture to the poem when contrasted with the one-part inventions of the modern cityfolk. At one point the archeologist asks himself,

Can the middens
of the tribe I study tell if family
strife always reveals a culture's dynamics,
if, amid bones, flints, sufferings are the same?

(For those of you who have forgotten, a midden is a dunghill or waste pile, short for kitchen-midden).

The poem also assumes textures and contrasts from Hoffman's varying forms. There are prose poems set in blocks; prose poems set in the shape invented by Karl Shapiro for his *Bourgeois Poet* series (1964)—poems roughly in the shape of the state of Oklahoma, with the first line extending to the left like a panhandle; prose poems with end-rhymes (some of which are very facile: wheeze/sneeze; stool/school); and prose poems with internal rhymes (feign/detain).

Just as the book began with a prologue introducing the characters, #42 serves as an epilogue ruminating on the poem's subject, Fate, when one of the tycoon's sons unwittingly causes the torture and possible demise of a total stranger in a foreign country. The book concludes with #43, the archeologist's final list. The archeologist concludes,

. . . Based on these found things
spared the depredations of decay or time,

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> my study of a culture at a distance
> must, so little known of its inner life, be
> fiction. And now, look into my notes, and write.

Even modern science cannot verify what inference grasps as "the truth" about individuals, present or past. The "tribe" of Hoffman's title is not only an ancient race, but the entire human race. So little is known of our inner lives, the poet is saying. What we think we know is mostly fiction. So it is eminently appropriate that, of all the ways of telling, Hoffman has cast his long poem as a work of fiction. It is a challenging and rewarding addition to his canon.

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R. S. GWYNN

Poetry Chronicle

IN THE LAZY SUMMER AFTERNOONS OF MY MISSPENT ADOLESCENCE I was fond of ducking behind the ice cream cooler at the Carolina Drugstore and reading magazines that invariably had words like *weird* or *fantastic* or *amazing* on their covers. I can still vividly recall the savor of fictions so pulpy that even the most resolute post-modernist wouldn't dignify them with the term *texte.* Perhaps the most memorable of all of them opened on a lost prospector mushing it on foot through an Alaskan blizzard. In the last stages of exhaustion and about to curl up in a drift for the big chill, he crested a snowbank and beheld to his amazement a huge office building, its brightly lit windows shining forth on the frozen waste. He crawled to the door, knocked feebly, and fainted.

Later, waking in a warm bed, he was greeted by a solicitous, silver-haired gentleman who identified himself simply as The Manager. The Manager, in response to the prospector's understandable curiosity, led him on a tour of the facility. Every floor was packed with hundreds of cubicles with intense souls pecking away at typewriters. From time to time the clatter of keys was interrupted by guffaws of unrestrained mirth. The prospector eventually asked the obvious question. "Why," replied The Manager, "this is The Joke Factory—the place where all the dirty jokes originate. We disseminate our product throughout the world, in every human language, from this central location." He allowed himself a faint smile. "Of course, now that you have stumbled upon our little secret, you will not be allowed to leave. *Ever.*" The prospector, who hadn't exactly struck it rich in the gold fields and who, though lacking much in the way of an audience, was no slouch in the joke department himself, expressed little displeasure at his fate. He quickly sat down in a vacant cubicle and began to type: "A Baptist minister, a priest, and a rabbi all stopped at a farmer's house and asked for a room for the night. . . ." The story appropriately concluded with The Manager collapsing in a fit of hysterics.

Since then, I have entertained no doubts that such a place does exist and that near it, looming behind the next glacier, stands another building, likewise filled with clattering keyboards and much laughter. This companion facility is The Fame Factory, where public reputations of all sorts are manufactured. We begin in the malodorous subbasement with politicians and ascend past movie and rock stars and NEA-funded performance artists to the thirteenth floor, where in a cobwebbed cubicle a shape with Helen Vendler's body and the head of Bill Moyers

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presides over the Big Board of Poetic Futures. From time to time a flurry of keys and mad cackles of laughter are followed by muttered incantations. A few odd phrases can be discerned: *Kinnell up 1/8. Bly down nine. Dove no change. Ashbery closing strong at twenty-eight.*

Perhaps the five poets under consideration here have occasionally heard their names lisped in such precincts, at least one quite loudly, but four of them have not achieved quite the level of recognition they merit. The one who has, on the other hand, has prospered out of all proportion to his minor gifts. Leading the former group is Dabney Stuart. Several years ago when I wrote an article on Stuart's poetry for a reference book I observed that the poet, whose first collection dates from 1967, had waited far longer than most to issue a selected poems. Now *Light Years: New & Selected Poems*[1] allows a retrospective of a career in many ways paradigmatic of a generation (Stuart was born in 1937).

Stuart's *The Diving Bell* remains a remarkably accomplished first book that reveals much about the poetic temper of the late 1950s. In fashion similar to Lowell's *Life Studies*, the poems in *The Diving Bell* swing back and forth between literary and autobiographical subjects. "A Prayer," which opens both it and the present collection, describes the death of Jonathan Swift and concludes with a period flourish, an apostrophe to Mnemosyne. More typical, though, is another early poem, "Ties," which conflates family matters and sports in the kind of personal mythmaking that ties (no other word will do) much of Stuart's poetry together:

> When I faded back to pass
> Late in the game, as one
> Who has been away some time
> Fades back in memory,
> My father, who had been nodding
> At home by the radio,
> Would wake, asking
> My mother, who had not
> Been listening, *What's the score?*
> And she would answer *Tied,*
> While the pass I threw
> Hung high in the brilliant air
> Beneath the dark, like a star.

The Big Game of family romance, which confessional poets must play in public like any other spectator sport, lies as much at the heart of Stuart's poetry as it does that of Lowell or Plath. One of the new poems is set in an empty stadium with the poet (or his stand-in) leaning against a pole with his mother sitting "on the other / side hugging her knees." The

[1] LIGHT YEARS: NEW & SELECTED POEMS, by *Dabney Stuart.* Louisiana State University Press. $24.95; $14.95.

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totems of one's youth are not easily toppled; for Stuart the sports arena is as much an icon as the battlefield where Hemingway received his wound and his career.

Some of these early poems have been repunctuated and otherwise revised to such an extent that the poet is justified in classifying them as new work, while *Round and Round*, a book largely comprising ballads, has been pruned (too radically in my opinion) to a mere five poems. In *Common Ground* (1982), Stuart found a style that would characterize his subsequent work. If he was overly fond of being cryptic and elliptical in the early books, he seems equally determined to be accessible in the late. A case in point is "Killdeer":

> So that my father, who we thought was dying,
> Could see him, we carried his newborn grandson
> Up the back stairs of the hospital. The light was broken
> All over the blanket, and our child swam in his glasses
> With pieces of that broken light.

"Percussion," which opens the section of new work, displays a stunningly complex surface of sonic imagery in its description of ice cracking on a thawing winter magnolia tree:

> it sounds
> like Morse code—explicit,
> measured, conversant. The tree rising
> leaved among bare others
> becomes isolate, too, in its own
> sound, self-centered, breaking out
> in a language that would invent
> its listeners, the best of whom
> would dance to it, hearing
> the beat within the beat
> sleeved, insistent. Mozart, or
> the *Missa Luba*. The pupa's first
> slow distending ticks
> here, too, in the morning's
> waste, and the wrestling
> of sound from the joints of a body
> on the rack.

I'm not quite sure *how* we get from magnolia to Morse to Mozart to *Missa Luba* and also manage to take in birth, dance, and torture in a score of lines, but Stuart certainly seems to have his circus animals jumping through the right hoops.

One of the poets whom Stuart featured during his editorship of

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Shenandoah is Betty Adcock, whose fourth collection, *The Difficult Wheel*,[2] more than justifies his support of her work. Consider these lines from "To a Young Feminist Who Wants to Be Free":

> Perhaps I know too much, living as I must
> with the lives (in letters) of great- and twice-great
> grandmothers,
> southern women talking about their slaves
> as if it were ordinary. It was. Sometimes the wills are there:
> whole black families listed with the mules. It's terrible enough
> to die about, and people did: the saviors and the guilty
> and the simple poor. Never believe it's gone.

These sentiments, smoldering with anger but firmly held in check, are obviously not the most prudent for a contemporary American woman poet to display, finding in history metaphors somewhat more complex than those provided by Granny's handmade quilt. But Adcock seems determined to make her auditor (and reader as well) accept "the necessary, fearsome, precious, / backward whole embrace" of a past not rendered as a morality play promoting gender-solidarity.

In "Voyages," Adcock explores the rites of passage of five girls "playing / hooky from Miss Hockaday's Boarding School for young ladies,"

> prowling alleyways behind the houses,
> having skipped math class for any and no reason.
> Equipped with too many camelhair coats, too many
> cashmeres,
> we were privileged and sure and dumb. . . .

Peering through a fence into a local eccentric's backyard, they discover an inkling of the unfathomable: "a sailboat bigger that most city backyards, / bigger almost than any house it belonged to." The resulting epiphany, "the tiniest heave" of these latter-day blue girls' sward, is major: the grass seems "like a coat of light paint, like green ice / over something unmanageable . . . / as if all around us were depths we really could drown in."

Much of Adcock's "backward whole embrace" has been of her native Texas and of parents whose untimely deaths willed the poet the sole familial axes she grinds. Her characteristic stance is elegiac; recalling her lost landscape and a "great dead oak on its reddening hillock," she muses on why some images linger with such fierce persistence, standing "like something commemorative, / a tall stammer of substance not

[2] THE DIFFICULT WHEEL, by *Betty Adcock*. Louisiana State University Press. $17.95; $9.95.

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taken in." But this tree is not filled with Blakean angels. It is ultimately dismissed in an almost matter-of-fact manner, filling "the fireplaces / of three or four houses around." Taking her clue from Frost, she finds the fear it once inspired present so much nearer home:

> But even here, a thousand miles from my childhood;
> even now, my love, as you walk
> across our suburban lawn toward this house
> that hardly ever vanishes; even now
> as you move through the smoke of first dark,
> the birds in my wrists begin stirring,
> knowing we're dying, knowing we shine
> like that shining, all bone, all bone.

When I recently ran into a former student who had taken poetry writing during a semester when Adcock gave a reading at our school, she told me how lucky she considered herself to have met "Margaret Atwood." I didn't disappoint her by correcting her memory, but now that I think of it I should have; she was actually luckier than she knew.

My next two poets, Daniel Mark Epstein with six books to his credit and Thomas Carper with two, remain largely unremarked, despite their frequent appearances in prestigious periodicals. Both are poets with a strong formal bent, Epstein working in a variety of blank and rhymed meters and Carper focusing on the sonnet to the exclusion of virtually everything else. Epstein's *The Boy in the Well*[3] covers quite a bit of intellectual and cultural ground, with poems on classical and biblical subjects, Vivaldi, Phidias, Chagall, and others. Opening with poems on Poe and Mallarmé, respectively, neither of which is very accessible, does not seem to me the wisest of strategies, but Epstein quickly redeems himself with "The Inheritance," a brilliant sestina on his father, who died of a heart attack in his car, leaving behind money strewn in the front seat and a set of "cryptic keys":

> My job: to find the locks for those keys
> And what they guarded, a puzzle my father
> Left scattered in his wake for me to face.
> I had to open the doors under his shadow
> Though one might easily open upon my death,
> A scene of vengeance, or a vault full of money.

The sestina has become such a staple of the workshop-exercise school of poetry that one is likely to forget how good it can be when its form does not choke on its own obsessive repetitions. Here is Epstein's envoy:

[3] THE BOY IN THE WELL, by *Daniel Mark Epstein*. The Overlook Press. $19.95.

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Father, open the door behind the shadow
Money cast between us, and then Death;
Face me, bless the bearer of these keys.

The title poem has the haunting yet faintly absurd quality of a folktale. The boy has learned from a blind beggar "How from a pit delved deep enough / You could see the stars shining at noon." Now, through no fault but his own, he has learned the Faustian cost of seeing the "wafer of light / Which hovers above him at the mouth of day." Allegory? Perhaps. Epstein's fellow poets will, I think, quickly make the connection. Perhaps beginning with Mr. Poe and M. Mallarmé was not so far-fetched as it first seemed. Fittingly, Epstein's *symboliste* Cook's tour ends with "Helen," a poem about a class of children begging their teacher for a love story:

They prattled, except for one,
Helen, whose gaze looked lost
In the maze of willow branches,
The girl the boys liked most

For the faraway blue of her eyes
And brown hair straight as rain.
"Tell us a love story, please,"
They begged the teacher again.

He frowned and longed for the bell,
Saying "All the love stories I know
End in heartache, or death—"
Then Helen, from the back row

Called at last from her daydream
In the voice of an innocent lover,
"Tell us a story anyway
And stop before it is over."

Faced with a closing piece as charming as this one, I can only hope that Epstein, too, has stopped before he is over and is holding a few poems equally delicious in reserve for his next collection.

Thomas Carper's *From Nature*[4] might at first glance be taken for a New Formalist production, that is, until one looks at Carper's dust jacket photo, in which he looks fit enough but not particularly new. A few years ago a friend passed me a limited edition of some of Carper's sonnets on music, and I liked them a great deal, both for their formal skill and for their reverence for the old-fashioned act of saying something worth

[4] FROM NATURE, by *Thomas Carper*. Johns Hopkins University Press. $16.95.

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saying. Of the fifty-nine poems included here over half are tightly rhymed fourteen-liners, and a closing sequence, "On Basho's Way," contains fourteen seventeen-line hybrids, each made up of a sonnet and closing haiku. I will let "Observations," in which the poet takes a walk with his dog, stand as representative of the whole:

> We pass a cherry tree whose blossoms crowd
> Into the vigorous gusts of warm spring air.
> How far will we have journeyed when a loud
> Music will say the birds are feasting there?
> We reach a wide pond where I pause to gaze
> At my clear image—until Nadia's tongue
> Wrinkles my face in water. Are the days
> Rippling away? Am I no longer young?
> And there, ahead, the distant mountains rise,
> Green and austere. How much time will have passed
> Before we reach their summits and our eyes
> Look toward the unimagined North at last?
> I feel the weight of years already gone,
> As Nadia barks, and pulls, and leads me on.
>
> *Aware of our departure,*
> *Fish arc through seas of sunlight*
> *To splash good-bye behind us.*

Only those who have labored in this arduous vineyard will appreciate the small pleasures of the metrical inversion in the sixth line or the pace of the monosyllables in the tenth. The couplet is usually the make-or-break point in an English sonnet; Carper triumphs here by using his caesuras to imitate the lurch of dog against leash. In the next poem, he employs enjambment to parallel the now-peaceful flow of a brook that earlier raged furiously enough to sweep a century-old house downstream:

> At the spot
> Where the last trace of wreckage lies, we take
> A turn, and come upon a beautiful
> Flow of water dropping into a pool.

Such metrical effects, I realize, are going to be lost on most readers, so it is with pleasure that I report that Carper has also carried off the trick of employing syntax and diction drawn "from nature" or, at the least, refined from the natural resources of conversational speech. His sentences are as clear as the water in that pool. " 'You Can't See Anything without a Flashlight,' " a poem about an American boy's disappointed reaction to a deserted German bunker in Normandy, concludes in a way that typifies Carper's technical virtues and his equally impressive moral ones:

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Now, almost fifty years after that day,
The young arrive to see a sunny field
Of craters like the moon's, and find their way
To secret rooms. But nothing is revealed
Unless one brings a flashlight, or one brings
Some other light, to make sense of such things.

But how, indeed, to make sense of such things as Kenneth Koch's recent election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters? I began by revealing the sorry reading habits of my youth. I will close by admitting that for a couple of years in graduate school I read Koch's poetry with some pleasure. This, I must further confess, was at roughly the same time that I vowed to watch every episode of the daily reruns of "Green Acres" with the idea of producing a monograph on the influences of Ionesco on the events at the Douglas farm. In my own defense, I might add that Koch's early poetry had the virtue of being funny, and the wonderful "Fresh Air," with its claim that "there are too many creepy people associated with poetry," fully lived up to its title. That air, however, blows pretty stale these days, witness these representative passages from "A Time Zone," the ten-page centerpiece (it was reprinted in one of the annual *Best Poems* anthologies) of Koch's *One Train*:[5]

I am of New York not a native
I'm from Cincinnati which is to this place's
nominative like a remote dative
In 1948 from college I come here and finally settle
The city is hot and bright and noisy like a giant
boiling kettle
. . . . . .
East Hampton glaringest of Hamptons Hampton of sea
shine of de Kooning and of leaves
Frank's visiting we're composing a poem he tugs at
his sleeves
It is a Nina we are composing it is a Nina Sestina
For Nina Castelli's birthday her adorable sixteenth one
This year this month this week in fact Frank writes
"Hatred"
A stunning tour-de-poem on an unending roll of paper
It makes going on forever seem attractive
Writing in the manner of O'Hara means being extremely
active

This tragic account of how an innocent young man from the Midwest comes down to the city and falls in with bad company should have been subtitled "Homage to W. C. Fields: 'The Fatal Glass of Beer.' " Of his

[5] ONE TRAIN, by *Kenneth Koch*. Alfred A. Knopf. $20.00.

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Coming in the Autumn 1996 issue of The Hudson Review: Bruce Bawer takes on the press, Denis Donoghue examines T.S. Eliot and closure, Dana Gioia reports on the American literary scene, William H. Pritchard provides new perspectives on William Blake.

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attempts at imitating O'Hara, Koch honestly admits, "I try it out with little success." That should have told him something almost fifty years ago, one would think, but it seemingly hasn't deterred him from forging ahead with the bizarre mission of rewriting *When the Sun Tries to Go On* in the voice of Ogden Nash. Won't the New York School *ever* let poor Frank r.i.p.? He already holds the dubious honor of having inspired more cheesy knockoffs than Calvin Klein.

Auden, who knew the difference between camp and camp follower, said that "poetry makes nothing happen"; Koch's poetry makes even less happen, but because it so relentlessly trivializes its own aims it rests fairly secure from criticism. Ashbery, who has successfully built a huge reputation on the strength of saying nothing of interest in an interesting manner, usually reduces critics to babbling about his skillful *mimesis* of the meaninglessness of contemporary American speech. Apparently these critics have never witnessed a presidential press conference or a Barbara Walters interview or are too young to recollect the ringside commentaries of Howard Cosell. Koch seems determined to one-up his buddy by saying nothing of interest in an *un*interesting manner. *One Train* concludes with a twenty-page sequence titled "On Aesthetics." Three samples, one of which (an average that reflects the whole) is not so bad, should suffice:

AESTHETICS OF TAKING A WALK

You
Put
One
Foot
In
Front
Of
The
Other.

AESTHETICS OF STONE

The gods take stone
And turn it into men and women;
Men and women take gods
And turn them into stone.

AESTHETICS OF ECHO

Echo was Us
A nymph who lived in Din
Every cliff. If

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(In case you're wondering, it's the one in the middle.)

Aesthetics poems! Gee, what a swell idea! I can't help but add one of my own:

AESTHETICS OF READING KENNETH KOCH
LATE AT NIGHT WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY
WATCHING MTV

This sucks
Change it.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

JOSEPH EPSTEIN is the editor of the forthcoming *Norton Book of Personal Essays*. . . . CHARLES TOMLINSON's most recent publications are *Jubilation* (Oxford), *Selected Poems of Attilio Bertolucci* (Bloodaxe), and *In Italia* (Garzanti). . . . "'Worse than a Dozen Kids'" is the first chapter of LUCILLE DAY's in-progress autobiography, *Memoirs of a Teenage Mother*. Her poetry appears in *Mother Songs* (W.W. Norton, 1995). . . . JOHN HAINES is the author most recently of *Fables and Distances: New and Selected Essays* (Graywolf). . . . DEAN DONER* has published fiction and criticism. He was a professor of English and retired as an administrator at Boston University in 1987. He died in 1990. . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ has edited a collection of essays on W.E.B. Du Bois just published by Routledge, and a collection of essays and poems on Maxine Kumin due out this fall from University Press of New England. . . . JOHN HOLLOWAY's most recent verse publication is *Civitatula: Cambridge and the Little City*, a book-length poem on Cambridge, U.K., town, university, surrounding region, from earliest geological time to the present day.

DAVID LITTLEJOHN* is a novelist, critic, and professor of journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. . . . DENNIS SAMPSON's most recent book is *Forgiveness* (Milkweed Editions). . . . FLOYD SKLOOT's *The Night-Side*, a collection of essays about chronic fatigue syndrome, is due from Story Line Press in September. . . . SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH's work has appeared recently in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Salmagundi*, and *Utne Reader*. . . . NEAL BOWERS has a nonfiction book due from W.W. Norton in 1997—*Words for the Taking: A Case of Plagiarism*. . . . A collection of RICHARD HORNBY's theatre reviews for *The Hudson Review* will be published in the fall by Applause Theatre Books, under the title *Mad About Theatre*. . . . In the autumn of 1996, BERT CARDULLO will be the Fulbright Scholar in American Studies at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY's recent book *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in biography in 1996. . . . WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD's next piece for *The Hudson Review* will be a review of the Peter Ackroyd biography of William Blake. . . . CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK teaches at Williams College. Her most recent book is *Rejoining the Common Reader: Essays, 1962–1990*.

HAROLD FROMM and Cheryll Glotfelty have edited *The Ecocriticism Reader*, just published by the University of Georgia Press. . . . THOMAS M. DISCH's recently published *Castle of Indolence* was a nominee for the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism, which it did not receive. . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS' fifth book of poetry, *Breakdown Lane* (Johns Hopkins University Press) was named a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times Book Review* and was a finalist for The Poets' Prize. . . . R.S. GWYNN has recently edited *The Advocates of Poetry*, an anthology of essays by twentieth-century poet-critics (University of Arkansas Press).

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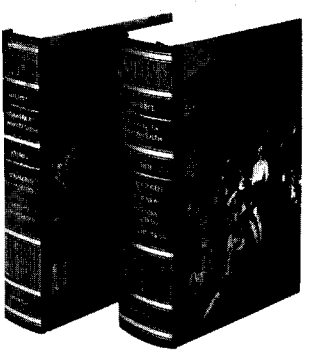
Modern Editions of Classic Works for Today's Readers

THE AMERICAN COMMONWEALTH

In Two Volumes
By James Bryce



In American studies there are two classics of the nineteenth century by foreign observers. In *Democracy in America* (1835) the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville interpreted American society through the lens of political theory. In 1888, the Scotsman James Bryce examined "the institutions and the people of America as they are." Interviews and even friendships with leading citizens, and travels throughout the land, enabled Bryce to produce "a grand atlas" of American society and political institutions. "Why Good Men Do Not Go Into Politics" and "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents" are typical discoveries that emerge from Bryce's cogent explanations of the actual operations of political parties and municipal and state governments. Bryce later served as England's ambassador to the United States from 1907-1913. The new Liberty Fund edition of his masterpiece includes contemporaneous (1889) reviews by Woodrow Wilson and Lord Acton.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

If W.H. Auden is correct—and it is by no means certain that he is—in averring that the world will pardon Rudyard Kipling and Paul Claudel for writing well, what about Robert Lowell, whose reputation has slipped considerably since his death? *Bien-pensant* politics and good old American democratic snobbery were key elements in its formation, and Lowell's may have been one of those literary reputations that needed him to be alive, stoking the fire to sustain its flame. His vocation may have been stronger than his gift.

—Joseph Epstein, "Mistah Lowell—He Dead," p. 185.

More than one contemporary of Charlotte's resorted to the fire metaphor. George Eliot, as well as George Henry Lewes, found it in the novels ("What passion, what fire within her," said Eliot) and Thackeray, who made the mistake of introducing Charlotte—at the party he gave for her at his Kensington home in 1849—as Currer Bell, was told off by C.B. in no uncertain terms: "I believe there are books being published by a person named Currer Bell, but the person you address is Miss Brontë—and I see no connection between the two." At that dinner party, she refused to be drawn out by the other guests, eventually retiring to the dimmest corner of the study, not even deigning to speak with Jane Carlyle. Of course the Brontës never set up as ideal guests for a good social evening.

—William H. Pritchard, "My Brontë Problem—and Yours?", p. 301.

Fairy tales are more, much more than stories we tell, or allow others to tell, our children. They lie deep in our own consciousness, our first encounters with narrative. From Red Riding Hood to Superman (for [Marina] Warner's definition of fairy tale, or as she sometimes calls it, the wonder tale, is broad and comprehensive) they shape our expectations and understanding of the situations and the human agents in the world around us. So it is no small thing that no one who reads Warner's book will be able to think about fairy tales in the same way again.

—Clara Claiborne Park, "Banqueting on Facts," p. 309.

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